

#18 January 2003

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The Comics Magazine

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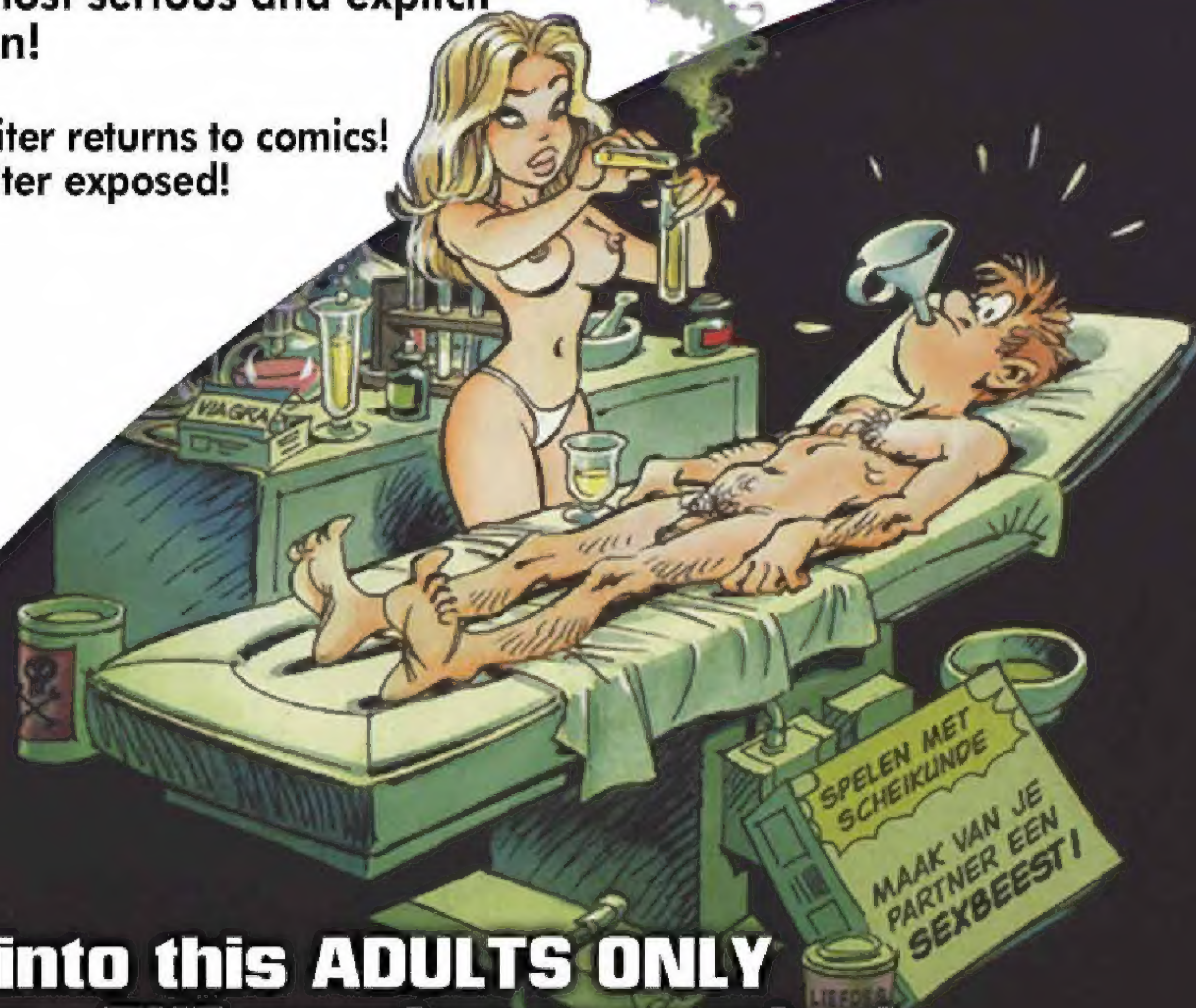
Annie Nocenti interviewed - Former **Daredevil** writer returns to comics!
The **Andrew Vachss** Interview - the hard hitting writer exposed!

Plus:
2002 reviewed
Dreddcon 3
Marie Severin
Bill Willingham's **Coventry**
Spain's **Reverso** debuts

Columns from:

Carol Close, Arnold T Blumberg, Martin Shipp,
Kevin Hill, Selina Lock and
the usual suspects.

Comics from Terry Wiley
and Paul Rainey.



**All jam packed into this ADULTS ONLY
edition of Borderline - THE comics magazine!**

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THE COMICS MAGAZINE

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This month's thanks go to: Ann Nocenti and Ralph Macchio. The IT guys at Dark Horse comics for sorting out images for us. Mike Kidson for working his arse off over Christmas to ensure the main feature was completed. And to all of you who have made sure we're still here 18 months after we launched!

Cover by Jaunty Jim Campbell, original cover art by Dany – if you drink this it'll get bigger!

In 7 weeks: #19 features - an interview with Stuart Immonen; an expose from Bill Rosemann and other stuff!

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IT'S THAT MAN AGAIN

Phil Hall bows out at the height of his abilities...

THIS is the last issue of Borderline for Reviews editor Andy Winter, one of the 'founding fathers' of the magazine. Andy, who is an old friend of mine, completely unrelated to comics, wants to have a real go at comics writing – many of you will hopefully remember Andy and Natalie Sandells' debut GN – DevilChild.

Andy also wants to do some different things in his career and the time Borderline takes up meant he just wasn't going to be able to dedicate that amount of time to it and retain the same high standard he set himself on this mag. We're sorry to see him go, but none of us have seen the last of him. Borderline will be covering anything he gets up to and he won't be too far away.

Andy's place as reviews editor is being filled (temporarily) by our publisher Martin Shipp and as usual if you have anything for this popular section of the magazine you can contact Martin at martinshipp@borderlinemagazine.co.uk. Neil McOnie, a regular contributor to a number of trendy London magazines, will replace Martin at some point in the spring.

This is also the last issue for another of the 'founding fathers' – the guy who came up with the idea of Borderline – me. I'm stepping down. I'm calling it a day. There are others who can and will make their own mark and create their own vision of how Borderline should be. I'm going to be around reading it and probably commenting on it and as I'm a director of Borderline Media Ltd I'm going to be dealing with other company interests. But, I've burned out on mags! I might have only been doing this for the same amount of time as Mike or Martin – your new co-editors – but I also did 11 years hard labour working at *Comics International*, producing the bulk of the work on that magazine for many of those 11 years. And before that there were the fanzines and there have also been a number of other things that

I've either edited or played a big part in the production: from books to computer games to events. I'm very tired and need to take a break; to get away from comics for a while and concentrate the time I spent on Borderline with my wife, our families and my new interests. There's a saying in the UK, *A change is as good as a rest* and I've decided I'm going to have both.

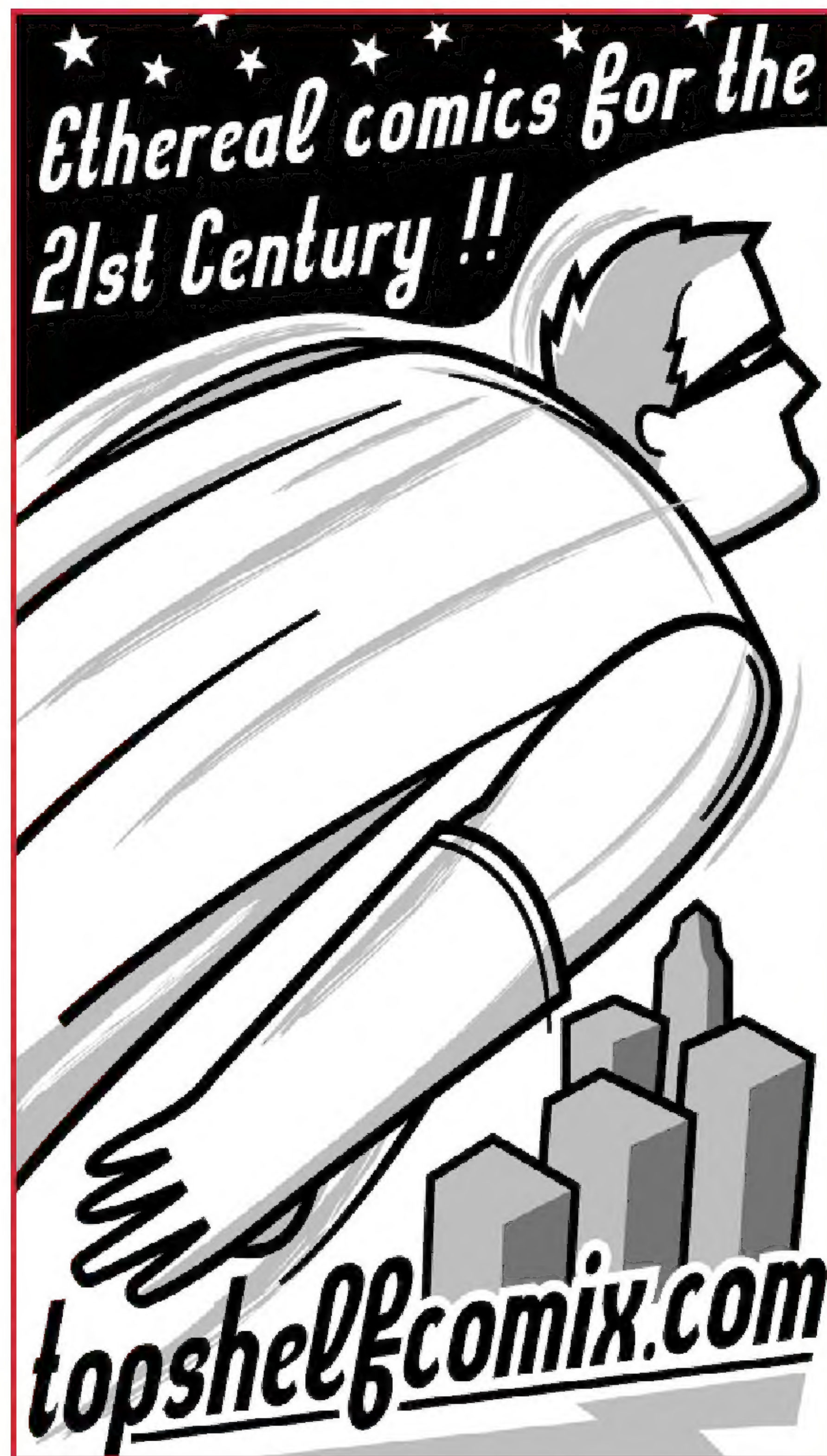
Since Borderline began I've changed careers. I used to think of myself as a comics professional, albeit the perennial backroom boy – one who has been *here* for a long time. I eventually grew to treat my hobby like a sick, bed-ridden relative. As much as I loved it, I wanted to let it go. I wanted it to let go of me. Then, during the worst of times for Borderline – the Cool Beans World fall-out and the alternative hopes being dashed – I found something new to pursue as a career. I like it and it's worthy and it makes me feel as if I'm contributing something important to the world. And I get to do it with the minimum of fuss and few signs of appreciation – that's something I've grown accustomed to and oddly enough something I quite like. It is true that it is better to give than receive...

Obviously, nothing is ever carved in stone and offers can be attractive...

But, before I go let me introduce you to Steven Allen. Steve is a friend of mine, from the real world, who is taking over the design and layout of Borderline. He's pretty hot in all the applications I use to produce the magazine, so give him a couple of issues to find his feet and he'll impress you mightily with his own unique sense of design. He's not a comics guy and has kindly volunteered to take the production responsibilities from me until one of the existing team becomes adept enough.

And that's about it. Take care.

Phil Hall, Northampton. December 31st 2002



A WOMAN WITHOUT FEAR



ANN NOCENTI INTERVIEWED

Borderline editor Phil Hall returned to reading comics in 1987 after a seven-year break. The first thing that struck him was the degree to which US comics had matured. Creators such as Alan Moore, Frank Miller, Dave Gibbons and Dave Sim were being instrumental in bringing about an actual change in comics, rather than just an illusion of change. But while the industry praised DC for its innovation and looked to the independents for tomorrow's next big thing, Marvel Comics was also quietly producing a number of notable and distinctive contributions.

By 1988, Peter David had begun transforming the Hulk and for a period of about three years that title was unequalled in spandex quarters. Roger Stern and John Buscema had just finished a groundbreaking run on The Avengers, with storylines that wouldn't have looked out of place in The Authority today. J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck had taken Spider-Man to places he'd never been before and David Michelinie and Todd McFarlane were about to return the webslinger to the top of the charts. While all of this was going on, two of Marvel's most talented young creators did something with a character many believed had reached its peak and could not be bettered. It took them 32 issues to tell a story of failed hope, damnation and eventual redemption. Forget Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, David Mazzucchelli, Gene Colan, Bill Everett or Wally Wood; Ann Nocenti and John Romita Junior's Daredevil was the phase for the character that comics historians will eventually point to as being one of the most important.

In this special feature, Phil begins by telling us why he feels that Ann Nocenti's run on Daredevil was definitive and ends by fulfilling one of his ambitions by interviewing her...

THE MAN WITHOUT ANYTHING

THERE is a section in Garth Ennis, Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti's **The Pro** which suggests that superheroes and villains are only actually doing it for a laugh. There are lots of fisticuffs but no one really gets hurt. It's that old spirit of the 1960s Justice League of America, where a threat to the planet can be dealt with in a single issue and there's a joke and a smile at the end of it.

Remember this, it's important.

Ann Nocenti had begun writing **Daredevil** after Frank Miller's second spell on the title and frankly there wasn't a single person interested in comics that expected her to hold a candle to him. Many Daredevil aficionados hate her tenure on the book with a passion, complaining that her own politics permeated the subtexts of her stories and that the book lost all of its hope and became a darkly depressing series. These people obviously didn't get the point. "Ahead of its time" is a phrase used too often, but if you compare the pacing of Nocenti's issues to, say, Bruce Jones' current run on **Incredible Hulk** you'll see where a lot of today's cool writers will have learnt their trade.

Nocenti had a number of different artists in her first 12 months, ranging from Barry Windsor-Smith to Sal Buscema to Steve Ditko. She also worked with Todd McFarlane and Keith Giffen. She introduced new things to Matt Murdock's shattered life. There was the Newsboy Legion-esque Wild Boys, a group of pre-pubescent skateboard kids, and a new cast of supporting characters to complement the Karen Page/Foggy Nelson familiarity.

There was also Murdock's coming to terms with the events enacted in Miller's *Born Again* run on the title – stripped of his license to practice law he was effectively a disabled man with no income. Nocenti wrote some interesting vignettes around this and there were hints of subplots to come, but it wasn't until the arrival of John Romita Jr. that things really heated up. It was the beginning of a story that would end up with Daredevil going to hell, literally, metaphorically and everywhere in between.

Now operating out of an unlicensed help and advice centre in Hell's Kitchen, New York, Matt Murdock aka Daredevil was going to have it proved to him that he was a true hero – only he needed to first discover what hero truly means. I feel slightly sadistic admitting that for a year I was keen to see who would beat Daredevil up next! He started off by getting beaten by a girl (Typhoid Mary) and then a succession of second-rate hero-haters took a pop

and won a Kewpie doll. It was unusual to see a hero treated with such... disrespect, yet I lapped it up. I also found it ironic that the two lamest Marvel characters from my youth – The Hulk and Daredevil – were now the most intelligently written of them all.

I recall Fabian Nicieza expressing to me his disappointment at the failure of **Nomad**, a series that he was especially proud of, and one that followed the basic premise of the Road Movie. The thing was, Nocenti and Romita had done it years earlier in **Daredevil**, shortly after he had his arse handed to him on a plate for the last time. With no reason to stay in New York,

DD packs his bags and goes walkabout. It is the beginning of his voyage of discovery and redemption. It mixes itself with a bunch of unexpected characters – the Inhumans, a clone, Mephisto, a child and even the Silver Surfer. Nocenti explored deeply philosophical issues while Romita pushed the boundaries of comicbook art. They reinvented Marvel's map of evil and introduced us to the cunning son of Mephisto – Blackheart.

And at the end there was a real sense of a Pyrrhic victory, and the weird feeling that this was a bigger story being told, some of which must never be told. That was the impression I got

throughout Nocenti's run on this title, especially from the religious undercurrent that pervaded it. Whatever the outcome, it was just part of something bigger...

Daredevil has always been a comic that has succeeded when the lead character is part of a cast rather than trying to be the lone hero. If you look at Nocenti's run on this comic you will see that she essentially builds the entire story arc to a point where, by #282, it's far-fetched beyond belief – something far more incredible than you would ever have expected when discovering the horrors of nuclear war with Lance, the son of DD villain Bullet, way back in #250. There are few "stories" I've ever

read that so effortlessly carry you along, and through peaks where it climbs close to superhero perfection.

Over the last 18 months I've been on journeys of rediscovery. Being the editor of my own comics magazine means that I have the choice, should I desire, to wax lyrically about everything I've ever loved. But re-reading old classics sometimes has a way of levelling you – making you realise how *your* tastes have developed over the years. There have been a lot of comics which, on re-reading them recently, I've decided were maybe not the most important things to be taking up shelf space. On completing my most recent re-read of Nocenti's **Daredevil**, though, I

can honestly say that it has truly passed the test of time, because it's a very out-of-time story. Even the character Number 9, who was always the most likely part of the series to become dated, has probably more relevance in 2003 than she did in 1990.

In the process of putting this together I contacted Ann's former editor Ralph Macchio to ask for his comments on her work. He concluded by saying he wished she still worked for Marvel. I replied, why shouldn't she?

Say what you want about Frank Miller or Kevin Smith and Joe Quesada's **Daredevil**, Ann Nocenti's take knocks spots off all of them.



Borderline: *My earliest memory of you was as Louise Jones' (now Simonson) assistant editor on the X-Men and then you replaced her as editor before Bob Harras. That is correct, isn't it?*
Ann Nocenti: Yes.

BL: *What were those days like?*

AN: Fun. Editors were left alone more than they are now, maybe since the biz was booming, and everything printed seemed to sell, we were left alone to work on stories without much interference, except for the occasional Jim Shooter lecture on the principles of storytelling, i.e.: conflict! conflict! conflict! As in: I can't keep eating planets, but I

must keep eating planets! I can't sell my soul to Mephisto again, but I must sell my soul so that others can live! I hate my berserker rage, I love my berserker rage! I can't tie my shoes, but I must tie my shoes! Yeah, yeah, stories need conflict, but after a while it was the same ol' sturm n' drang song in every story.

Anyway, a typical day in the office was pretty varied. Talk to writers, toss ideas around about characters... like, who haven't we tortured lately? A lot of it was like singing in rounds, you wanted an overall changing storyline that lasted months, with little riffs each issue that were like short stories within a novel. Plus, you needed to give characters a sense of change without really changing them, like treading water, a sense of movement without violating anybody's essential nature. Like, say, Colossus. Now there's a boring guy. A real stiff, literally. But, also a good contrast to all the more emotional characters. So, we'd say,

how to spice up the stiff? Make him fall in love but he can't have the girl? Bring in someone from his Russian roots past? So, hopefully we'd come up with something fun that we could do with him, then move on to the next character. Then, we'd talk about theme, like, what's the latest twist on the "mutant menace" high concept? New legislation? Then maybe talk about visuals, like, what if the whole story were set in a snowstorm that you barely notice at first, but by the end the pages are so white no one can see each other? Come up with a fun challenge for the artist. Etc. etc....

After that kind of talk, the writer would go off and come up with ideas. Then maybe you'd look at some new pencils, check over the storytelling to make sure it was clear. Call up freelancers and beg for pages. Stuff like that. Put out small fires everywhere, like a mother's group writing in complaining about violence in a particular story, and you'd write them or talk to them about what we

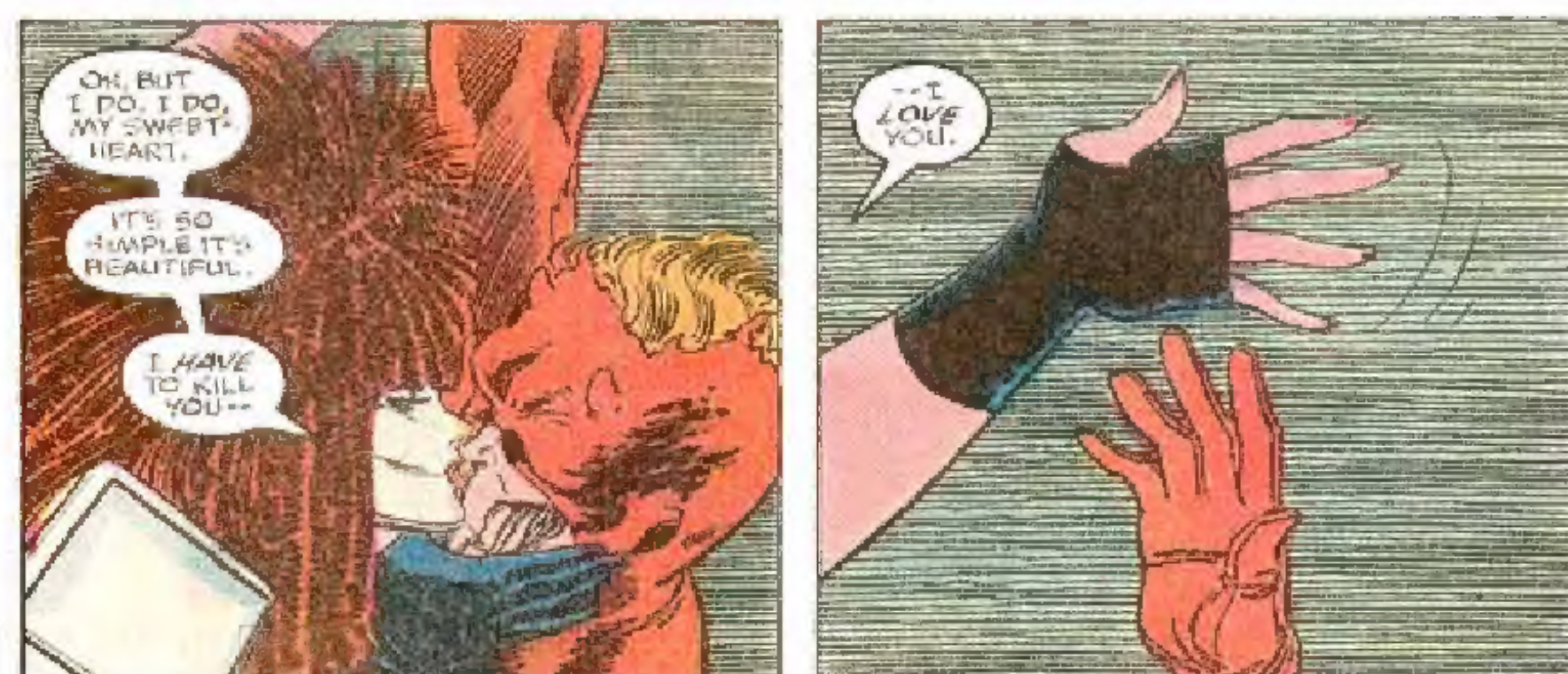
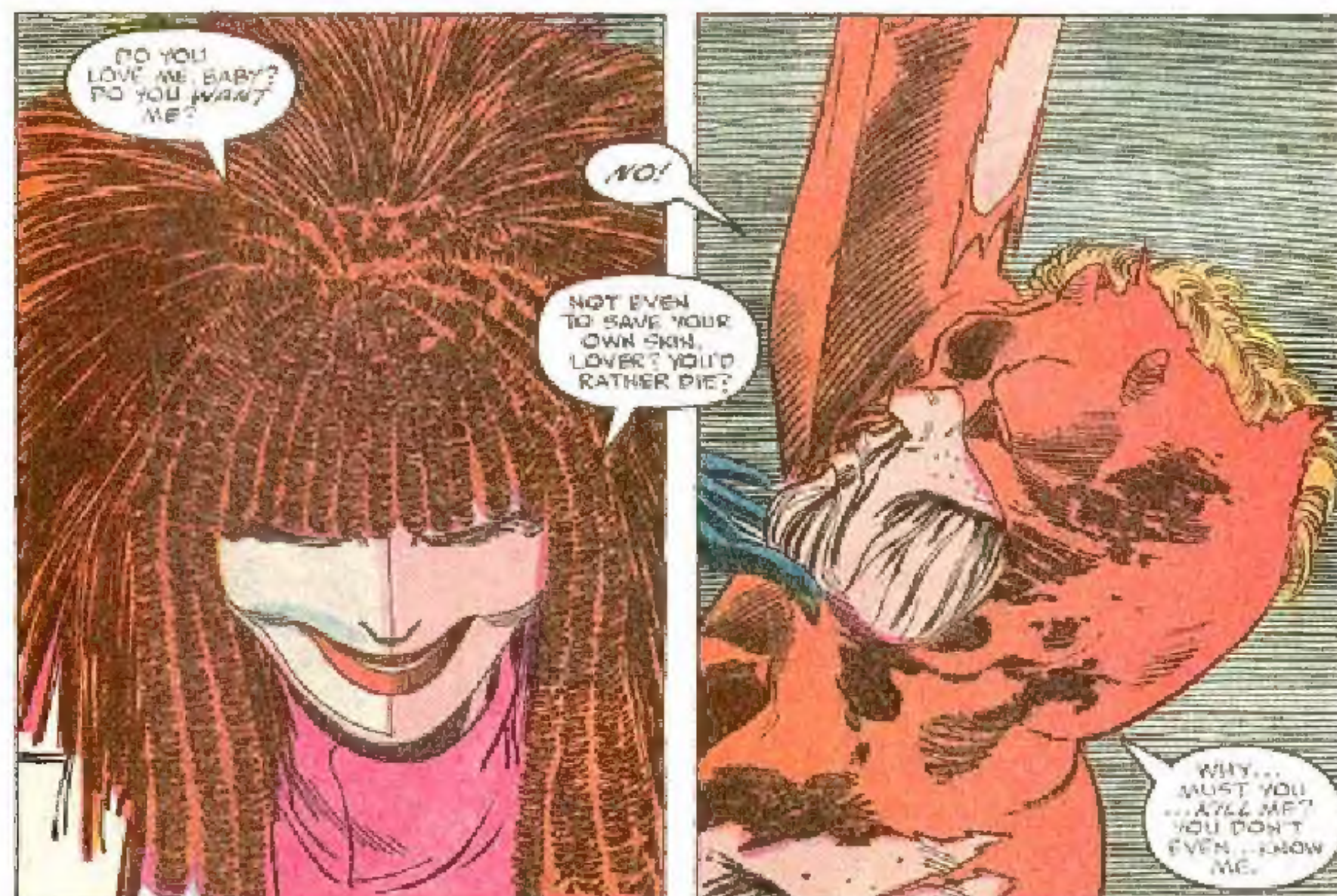
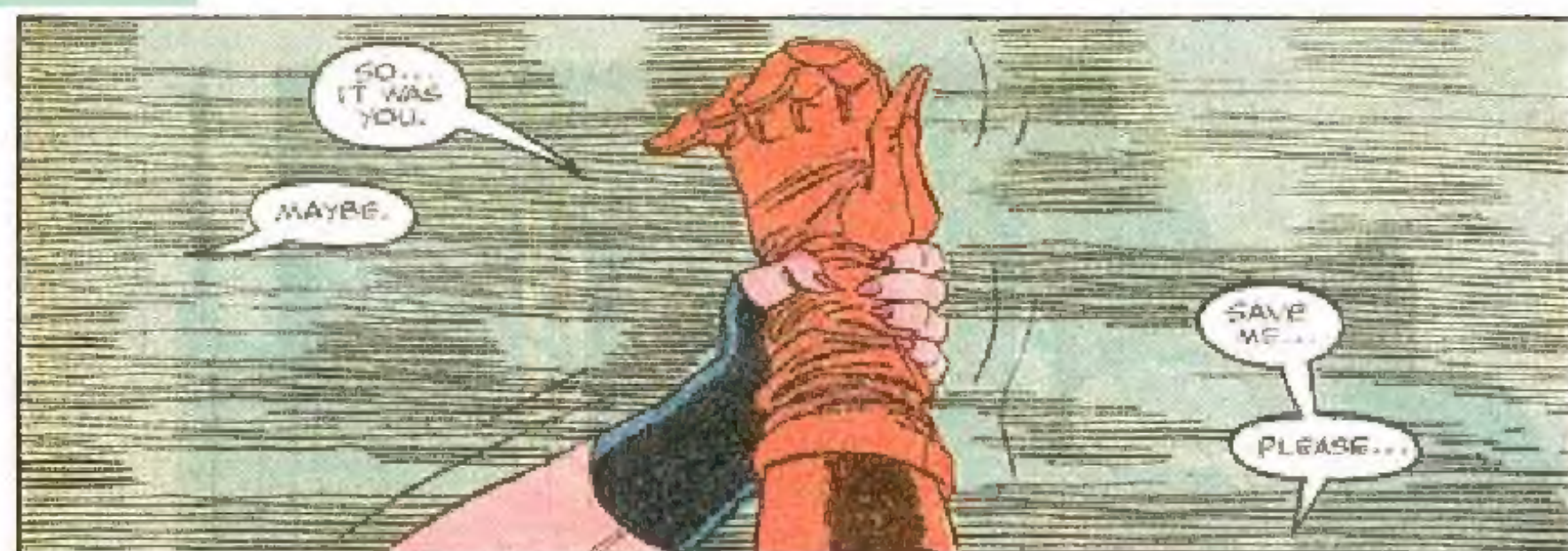
were trying to say in that story. I mean, I could go on and on, but that's enough right? Basically, it was a blast working there, a great way to stay infantile forever.

BL: *And how did you find yourself working for Marvel?*

AN: I answered an ad in the *Village Voice* for "editorial" work, went in and interviewed with Jim Shooter, got the job as his assistant, then shifted over to being an editor. So, I guess you could say I stepped in shit. (Not that I really ever understood that phrase. I mean, why is stepping in shit a good thing?)

BL: *What was your background and training?*

AN: I'm one of those anomalies that disproves and maybe circuitously proves the education system... I studied fine arts, I painted, etched, sculpted, did goldsmithing, ceramics, photography, and came to NYC with a fat portfolio of artwork... But, that



A terribly beaten almost dying, Daredevil is offered the final insult and act of love by a villain. Created by Nocenti, Typhoid Mary went on to have her own miniseries and said series spelt the end of Nocenti's Marvel career. Opposite: JrJr's new-look Mephisto...

said, I never made a single dime off my artwork. Never got a show, never got a job or anything published. Then I fell into a couple writing jobs, having

never studied writing or taken so much as a "creative writing" class, and have made my living ever since as a writer. So, what's up with that?

BL: Then you burst onto the scene with the 1985 mini-series *Longshot*, with Arthur Adams. What was the story behind that? Was it intended to be part of the *X-Men* or did Chris Claremont just adopt the character you created?

AN: Chris Claremont liked *Longshot*, so put him in the *X-Men* after the series came out. So no, *Longshot* wasn't created to be part of *X-Men*. I had written a couple short stories for Marvel, but wanted to pitch a new character, and came up with this "man with no past" tabula rasa idea. I think my original treatment was like a book, it was so complex. Being the visionary creature that she is, Louise Jones liked the idea, and said she'd edit it. I had these sample pages from Art Adams, a few pages of the *Beast* washing dishes that showed a stunning ability to draw and a delirious sense of humor, so we asked him to draw the book.

BL: Did *Longshot* act as a stepping stone to get *Daredevil*?

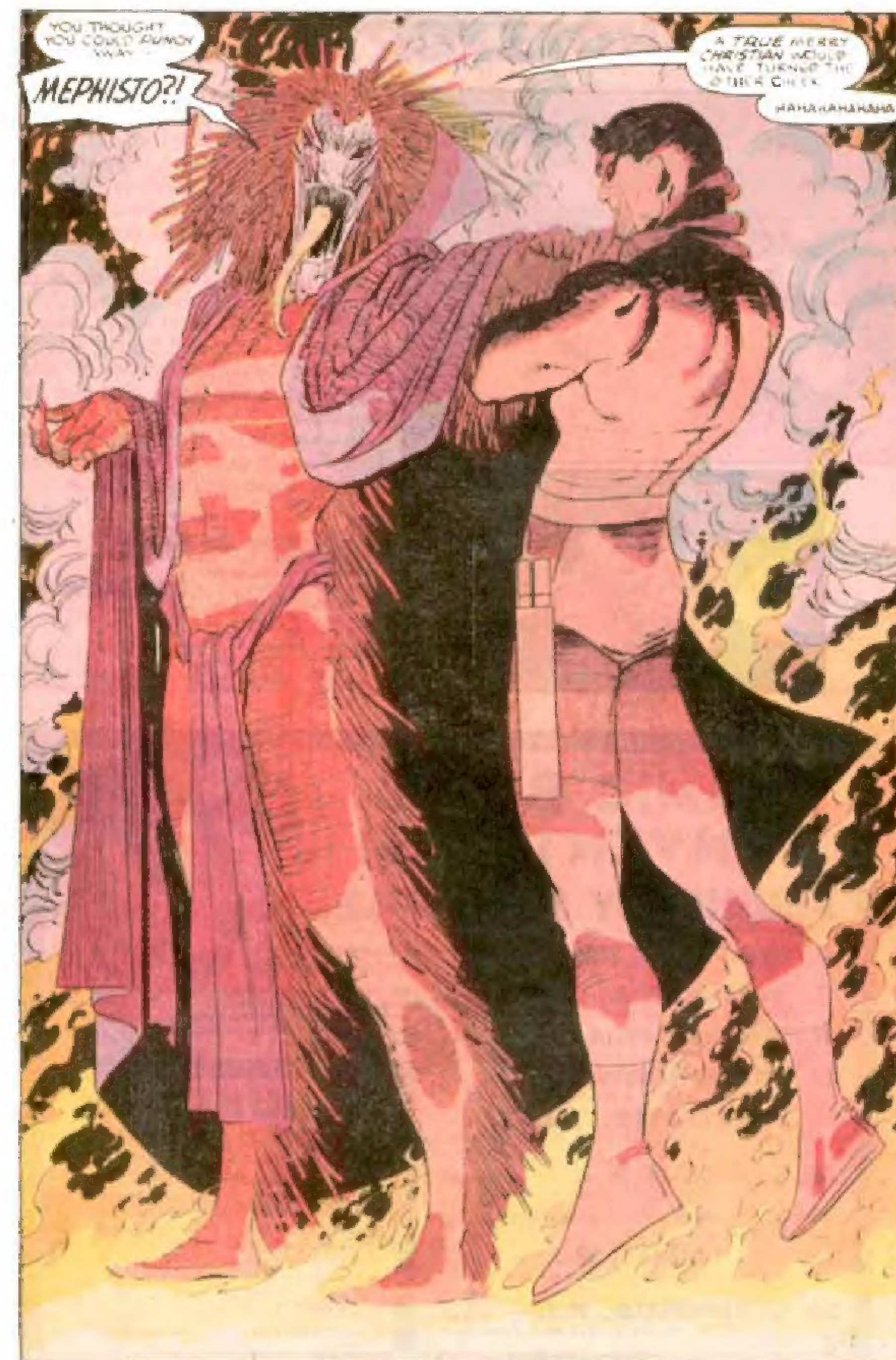
AN: I guess so, I don't remember. Ralph Macchio asked me to write the book, I guess you'd have to ask him why...

BL: How did you get the *Daredevil* gig and is there any reason you can remember why your initial run was so erratic?

AN: I didn't know the run was erratic... maybe there were fill-in issues in the archives that they wanted to get rid of? I can't remember why there would be breaks in my run, but probably it had to do with inventory stories that needed to get used up, or with giving extra time for an artist to draw. The reasons were probably kinda mundane.

BL: I was surprised to discover while doing a bit of research on you that the general reaction to your *Daredevil* run, from Americans, was dislike. Apparently you annoyed a lot of people and were talked about like

you were some kind of Pinko Liberal; were you aware of this at the time? AN: I got a ton of positive letters, way more than bad ones, so not sure about that. Who knows, maybe someone hid the bad letters from



me? I don't recall. I do remember I wrote a Captain America story once and someone wrote in and called me a commie, which I thought was funny. The great thing about writing comics is all the feedback you get, way more than writing for the "adult" world. It's fun, and usually critical stuff is helpful. I am a pretty left-swinging gurl, so I'm sure my stories were provocative. I know I always wanted them to have meat, food for thought. Did you agree with them?

BL: *I have to say I thought the issues you dealt with were subversive. Was it your intention to bring such a radical story arc to the table, and how did Ralph (Macchio) take it? He's never come across as being an editor that takes a lot of risks, yet your DD was a risk taker.*

AN: Ralph Macchio was totally, extremely supportive of everything I did, and also an important contributor to the book, as his critiques of the stories I handed in were always right-on. Little known fact: Ralph is a quiet subversive himself. He's like the "I, Claudius" in the Marvel history.

BL: *I felt Daredevil was always a second rate Marvel character and he constantly failed to make my A list of comics. Then at roughly the same time as I returned to comics you and John Romita Jr. started what I still believe is the definitive run on that comic. I'd never been that thrilled by Frank Miller and Klaus Janson – a great comic, but it just didn't do it for me.*

I almost liked Born Again but not quite. Then because of the Fall of the Mutants I picked up DD #252 and to be honest the first thing that grabbed me was John's artwork - he was like his father but with balls. So I decided to pick it up for a while, see what was

happening in a comic I'd dipped in and out of all my life. Was it your intention from the beginning to royally bufu Matt Murdock?

I mean, part of Daredevil's dark charm, since Miller, had been about how much could you continue to hurt the blind guy. You just decided to kick the shit out of the poor guy every month. It became literally "who's going to beat the crap out of Daredevil this month?", except it was quite stunningly done.

AN: Daredevil fascinated me from the get-go. He's a Christian that wears a devil suit. He's a believer in the justice system yet he's a vigilante. He's known for his relentless compassion, yet has none for himself. His very nature contradicts itself at every turn. Now that makes for great story potential. He's a walking conflict.

Yes, John Romita Jr. is a masterful comic artist. Sexy, elegant, always exciting, he was from start to finish a total joy to work with. And a great guy to boot. As for kicking the shit out of Daredevil, I guess that's part of how you test a hero. You throw them against the wall over and over. I don't know, I also think that I always had some problems with "superhero" comics, in that, I hated how stories had to be resolved violently, because, of course, they were "action" comics. So, maybe some of the, what, sadism in how I treated ol' Hornhead came from some bee in my bonnet about the nature of the medium.

BL: *When Daredevil #266 came out I had to re-examine my all-time favourite list of comicbooks because you'd now written one of them. A Beer with the Devil is still one of those comics that I give to people*

John Romita Junior's artwork on Daredevil emulated his father, who worked on the title in the 1960s. This series helped the artist to go onto bigger and better things, but Ann Nocenti's comics career stopped in full flight until 2003...



who don't like comics, or specifically superhero comics, in an effort to show them what this part of the medium can truly offer. I gave it to a priest who shopped at my store, and he hadn't read Marvel comics for

years but then bought an entire set of Ann Nocenti's Daredevils - not John Romita Jr's, he could take or leave John's art. He also claimed you had some of the best incidental dialoguing he'd ever seen in comics. I've seen Claremont use it, but not to the same effect you do.

AN: Thank you, those are very kind words. I love your story about the priest buying the DD run... cool.

BL: *Does it bother you that you didn't get the critical acclaim for Daredevil in the USA that you got in the UK?*

AN: Again, I'm not that aware of whether or not I got critical acclaim. I didn't know they liked the comic in the UK. I only saw the letters that were sent to me, and they were a mixed bag but mostly good. I was always kind of "out of it" when it came to the comics industry at large. I was having a blast, and was never too concerned with what anyone else thought about what I was doing, except that I liked to hear from the fans and listened to what they had to say. So, I'm not that aware of the critical response to my work.

BL: *How did it feel to work with John Romita Jr., considering that now he's something of a mega star in comics?*

AN: John was magnificent. I thought he was kind of a star back then, I didn't know he'd become a "mega" star. John added so much to those stories... His interpretation of Mephisto was brilliant, and he, of course, was the one that made Typhoid Mary who she is... I mean, John just "got" her right away. He really understood what I was trying to do, and created the perfect visual for her. I seem to recall he based her on his girlfriend at the time. (Lucky guy, right?)

BL: You continued to examine difficult themes in *Daredevil* while keeping it a superhero comic. Was that the intention? Did you want the reader to feel slightly ill at ease with the character?

AN: It's a good question, but I think I just told stories in an instinctual way, there wasn't much intention to make people feel ill at ease. I guess I found superhero comics to be a little thin, so I'd try to pack them with cool shit and layer them with other stuff... I think I was always a bit guilty about the sexy violence of comics. I mean, I kinda loved it and did it and played into that, but at the same time some latent conscience made me put "meaning" into the stories to offset any damage I was doing to young minds. I know, a bit schizo.

BL: Did you come in for much hostility or criticism about subjects you dealt with?

AN: My overall impression was good feedback, with a bunch of wildcard bad letters. I got letters from priests that wanted to discuss the religious themes in *Daredevil*, I got letters from kids that stopped eating meat after my animal rights stories, letters from drinkers that quit drinking after a story I did involving a destructive alcoholic... but, I also remember some people just didn't like so much "content" and "opinion" in a comic, and so maybe it just wasn't their cup of tea.

BL: You also showed an affinity with the *Inhumans*. Was this because you wanted to do the *X-Men* but Claremont had that sown up so you

saw the *Inhumans* as the next best thing?

AN: No, I did do a bunch of *X-Men* stories, with John Bolton, and also some Wolverine and Nightcrawler stuff, as I remember.

BL: As well as introducing Gorgon and Karnak into *Daredevil* you also produced the *Inhumans* graphic novel with Brett Blevins. What did you like about these characters?

AN: I really like the *Inhumans*, they seemed mythic to me, like a Greek god pantheon, elemental almost, and a great mix of personalities and powers. I loved the pressure cooker of Black Bolt's silence, the arrogance of his brand of heroism. I loved the good girl/bad girl contrast of Medusa/Crystal... the fun duet of Gorgon's magnetism and Karnak's braininess. I always thought that gang had potential...

BL: Who decided to change Mephisto's appearance? Presumably it was John, but normally things like this don't happen unless the writer has a part in it...

AN: I didn't like Mephisto's look, so got permission to change him, but the design was all John's, and boy was it terrific.

BL: People who don't know you for your superhero work will maybe remember you for *Someplace Strange* - how did that come about and don't you think it's weird that it's still sort of floating around nearly 15 years after you did it (when it was up at *Cool Beans World*)?

AN: Is it still floating out there? I would have thought that book long gone. But, I kinda remember John Bolton calling me about *Someplace Strange* going up online somewhere...

I just did an 8-page story with John Bolton, for *Batman Black & White*, and it was a blast to team up again. With *Someplace Strange* I wanted to do a classic children's tale about elemental fears, and play to John's strengths. He, of course, loved being able to draw his family (the two boys were his own boys, and he and his wife, Lilliana, are in the story too).

BL: After *Daredevil* I saw your

credits on a few things like stories in *Marvel Comics Presents* and *X-Men* back up strips and then... nothing. You were gone and working for *Scenario*... What happened?

AN: Well, in the mid '90s the industry had a collapse of sorts, I guess. The last thing I did was the Typhoid Mary series with John Van Fleet (who I'm doing a Poison Ivy/Batman story with right now, with his stunning full paintings! Yowza!). Anyway, suddenly all my projects were cancelled. I had a fully drawn and mostly inked series for Vertigo, called Jezebel's Virtue, which was probably the best thing I'd ever written, about the life of a prostitute, and DC just dumped it without publishing it. I had this beautifully drawn, very fun, almost finished Spider-Man series that was tossed... it was traumatic to have all that work thrown away, and then there just was no work. No one called me for jobs for a long time, but luckily I had been drifting away from the industry a bit, I'd gone to Columbia to get my masters in International Affairs, was writing journalism, and beginning to write film... So, even though it was sad to not get comic work, I was kind of ready for a change. I wrote some theater, some TV, a lot of essays for magazines... then a bunch of screenplays for various film companies... then took this gig at *Scenario*.



BL: Tell us something about that.

AN: Scenario is kind of a one-person show. I watch movies till I find three screenplays I like that are linked by some kind of theme (past themes have included Macho Tales, Comedy, The Unreliable Narrator, the Paranoid Thriller...) then I publish the three scripts in one volume, get them illustrated (sometimes using old pals from comics, like Jon J. Muth, George Pratt, Peter Kuper, Dave McKean, etc.) then I interview the writer or writer/director about the script, which is sometimes newcomers like Darren Aronofsky or Charlie Kaufman, or sometimes giants like Roman Polanski and Francis Ford Coppola.

I also commission articles about film narrative... You can see the magazine at www.scenariomag.com.

BL: What happened to Jezebel's Virtue and the Spider-Man thing? Can you give us any details of them?

AN: DC owns Jezebel's Virtue, won't give it back to us, won't publish it. Marvel owns the dumped Spider-Man series, who knows what they did with it?

Jezebel's Virtue was a four part series drawn and inked by James Romberger (he did the award-winning 7 Miles a Second.) He's a fantastic, edgy, more underground-style artist than DC is used to, and I don't think Vertigo appreciated his work too

much, it wasn't mainstream enough for them (or so they said when they dumped the series after it was drawn.) For research on that series I met with PONY (Prostitutes of New York) and interviewed a lot of the working girls. The series was about the life of a prostitute, and the split in the feminist community as to whether prostitution is empowering to women or degrading to women. It follows Jezebel as she turns tricks, and is also based on a piece of journalism I did long ago about a serial killer that was killing prostitutes, and the police didn't bother investigating until an

upper class suburban woman was killed. I had already done a version of this idea in the Typhoid Mary series I did in the mid '90s with John Van Fleet. A small excerpt from Jezebel's Virtue appeared in a small press anthology, which printed it (with a major printing mistake, they printed two pages twice and left out a page!) along with short stories by musicians Richard Hell and Robert Hunter.

The Spider-Man series was so beautifully drawn it's a shame it never saw print, even though it was almost finished. It was written back before a lot of people were talking to each other via the internet, back when "echo" was one of the pioneer chat sites. It was about that, and created a new villainess, I think I called her Eureka. I guess it would seem a bit dated now, but back then it dealt with stuff that was new, like creating identities online and all that. The artist, sadly, died shortly after Marvel cancelled the series. For that reason alone I would have loved it to see print, for his family, and in his memory.

BL: And now you mention that you might be returning to comics, can you tell us anything about this?

AN: Well, as I mentioned above, I have the Poison Ivy series with John Van Fleet, the short story with John Bolton, and Ethan Van Sciver is drawing a 2-part gun story, a Catwoman/Batman tale, that should be wonderful. I just spoke with Ethan for the first time yesterday, and we hit it off big time, we're very in sync, I can't wait to see his drawings. I'm also developing something for Farel Dalrymple, who writes and draws the enchanting Pop Gun War... we'll hopefully do something for DC.

BL: Have you completely left this

world or do you read any comics or follow any creators? Are you in touch with anybody from the old days?

AN: I must admit, I'm pretty out of touch. Other than Farel's Pop Gun War, I haven't read much comics... I'd love to read some good comics, but there's so much out there I don't know how to find the good stuff...

BL: What is Ann Nocenti into now? What books and music, what films and culture? You appear to do a lot of travelling - does this suit you?

AN: Yes, I like to travel, I went to Haiti and Hawaii last year... did a lot of dancing with Hawaiian Indians and dancing all night on mountaintops at voodoo ceremonies in Haiti... I love disappearing into other cultures, lurching toward ecstasy, so to speak...

I'm pretty eclectic, food-wise, music-wise... So, the whole pantheon of both, I suppose... ditto on the artists, I really never had a bad experience with an artist, they were all terrific to work with.

BL: Thanks again

AN: Thank you!

WHAT THE FORMER EDITOR THOUGHT

We went to Ralph Macchio and asked him what he remembered about Ann's appointment on Daredevil. Here's what he said:

I think I gave Ann the DD gig because after Frank left I wanted to give the book to someone who wouldn't be intimidated by his work. Ann seemed ideal because she didn't come from comics.

She brought a refreshing and quirky approach to the books she edited and I felt she might have the stuff to keep the character fresh. I was extremely proud of Ann's run. She introduced a slew of new, offbeat villains, including Typhoid Mary, who really took on a life of her own.

In addition to John Romita's great stuff, we had Art Adams, Barry Smith and Todd McFarlane do issues, too. All worked beautifully on Ann's superb plots. She was a great talent who picked up admirably from Frank and made the book her own.

I only wish Ann was still writing for Marvel. That's it.



THE BLANK PAGE

Andrew 'Chev' Cheverton ponders the nature and purpose of Superman...



WATCHING the new DVD Special Editions of

Superman I and *II* recently, I was struck by how compromised and flawed

Superman is as a character. As the first successful superhero, he created a template that has since been copied - and invariably improved upon - by countless imitators.

In these films, Superman's powers include the reversal of time by flying around the Earth, an amnesia-inducing kiss and some weird vinyl cling that he pulls from his chest emblem and throws at passing super villains to imprison them. What are these contrivances, other than last ditch attempts by writers to introduce drama and diversity into a character straitjacketed by his own singular abilities? It's something that always happens when people (particularly those outside comics) write Superman, an attempt to do something different with the character; something other than flying and punching and being invulnerable; a change from heat-vision and icy-breath.

Superman suffers from his own omnipotence and invulnerability, a quandary arising from his origin being a Christ myth, wherein a

benevolent father sends his only son to Earth. Not only does that introduce a bespoke attitude of infallibility, but it also creates nothing tangible for Superman to fight against: nothing can finally kill him, and that which does not kill him makes him stronger. A Christ myth is fine as far as it goes (and in Superman's case it includes the sacrificial death and resurrection and, being comics, the return to everyday tedium straight afterwards) but Superman's Unending Battle is, without resolution, ultimately without meaning.

Superman's only weakness is Kryptonite. When you consider it, there's no real reason why Kryptonite should *kill* him. Certainly, its radiation might replicate conditions on Krypton, thus rendering Superman powerless, as he would be on his home planet, but to say it would cause his death is to say living on Krypton would kill him, and that's patently unreasonable. Unless the sun's radiation combines with that of Kryptonite and this is what depletes Superman: a mixture of both his Kryptonian and Earthly heritages - that which is at the core of Superman's character - is, in Kryptonite, made deadly. It is, in mineral form, a symbol that Superman's cross-pollinated existence is itself unnatural.

As a comics fan and collector with incredibly few Superman comics, I'm always amazed at how much I enjoy the TV shows *Lois & Clark* and *Smallville*. As you can tell from their titles, these are series about people and places, not about spectacle and cosmic menace: they're not about Superman, they're about Clark Kent. In the final analysis, Superman is a dead-end character, but Clark is fascinating: because he is a god who would choose to be a man. Capable of great destruction and of enslaving the world, Clark instead chooses to save it, asking nothing in return other than simple thanks; then he becomes a man again. As a man, he is subject to the casual abuses and injustices that we all encounter day to day, yet he turns the other cheek and rises again when he is needed. His behaviour isn't that of the selfless Christ, but more that of a lost child forever seeking the approval of a parent. His Kansas childhood isn't his natural birthright but an alien rite enacted upon him, his true upbringing torn from him by the destruction of Krypton and his abandonment by his true parents. Superman is a trifurcated personality: as Kal-El, he is an orphan stranded in time and space from a home he'll never truly know; as Superman, he is a god who can dispense justice and offer protection to a populace who will revere him

yet hold him aloft from them; as Clark Kent, he can live amongst them, accepted as one of them while being lost in them, innocuous to the point of invisibility.

Every time Clark adopts the costume of Superman he asks for the praise every child craves from a parent, but to remain in the costume is to remain a god, and that he can never allow himself to do. For to be a god would be to be worshipped, which would place him above the humans he so seeks to emulate. A full-time Superman would succumb to his own power, a Christ turned into an Anti-Christ. Then his origin, of a father who rebels against the status quo of a

perfectly peaceful society and his son's effective banishment from a paradise to live out his span as lord of an unknowable other world, would take on a deeper, darker meaning. Instead of a son sent to Earth for good, he would be an angel stripped of legacy and plunged into a Hell.

In this scenario, Kryptonite would become an almost mythic totem. There would be no more effective weapon against a satanic Superman than an artefact of Heaven; saying this is what you never had, what you will never have; what you have lost forever; here, on Earth, where its very presence will reduce and, in the end, destroy you.



Above: Clark Kent considers Superman...

NO SEX PLEASE, WE'RE COMICS FANS!

Sex comics sell in enormous quantities worldwide. Yet they don't appear in Diamond's sales charts, you won't find them listed in Overstreet's Price Guide and you'll have to search long and hard to find any coverage of any of them in the Anglophone comics press. So Borderline's Mike Kidson decided that it was high time to have a look at a very popular branch of comics which few fans or critics even want to admit exists...

FOR STARTERS...

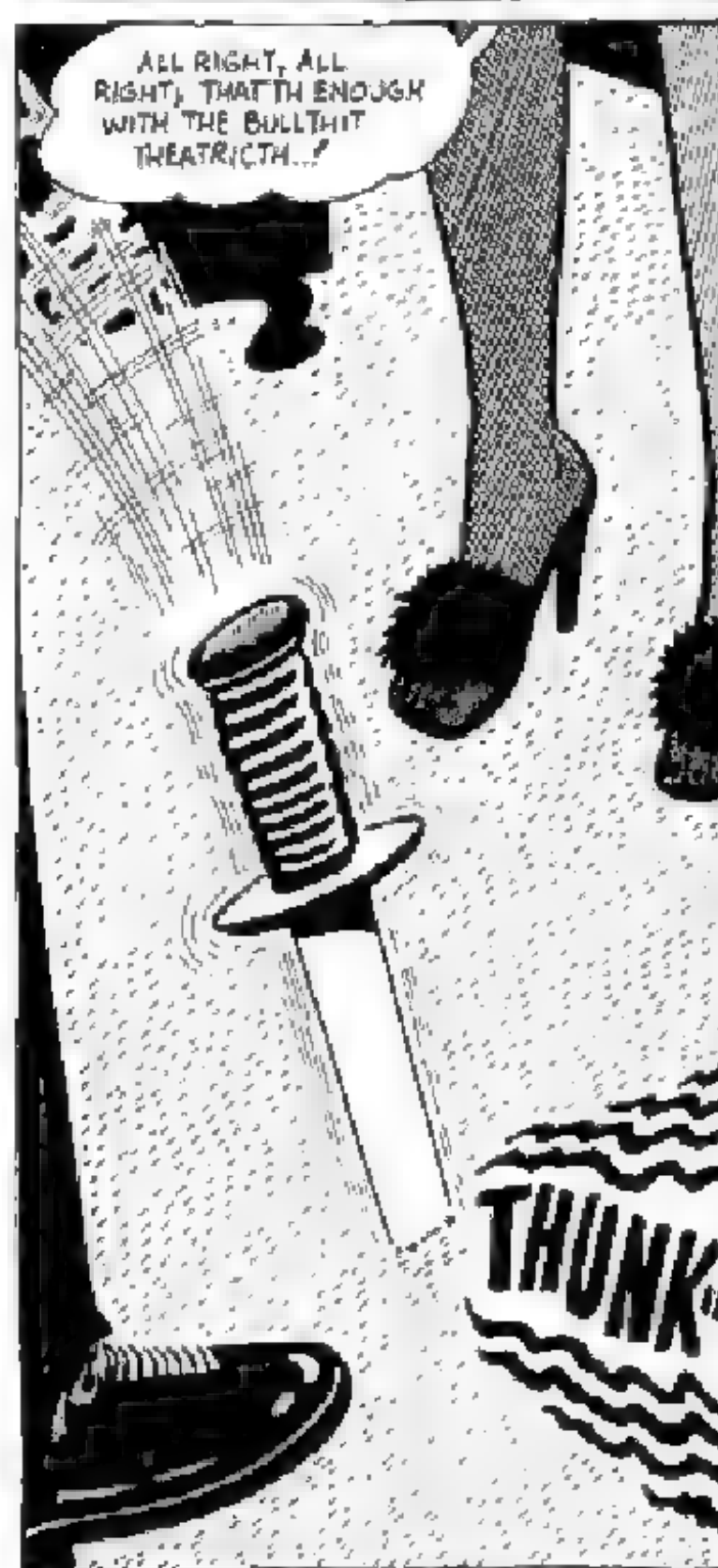
WHY is it that the Anglophone comics press ignores sex comics? Eros Comix, Heavy Metal and NBM Publishing are just three American firms specialising in different varieties of sex comic, and all three seem to have been surviving very nicely for years. Someone's buying what they publish. Maybe even "real" comics fans buy them - but apparently they aren't about to talk about it.

There are all sorts of obvious reasons why, of course. For one thing, any hint of sex, or for that matter of anything supposedly adult other than violence, was wiped out of the Anglophone comics years ago. Comics were defined as being for kids, and kids mustn't learn about sex, must they? In fact, most Anglophone comic fans these days are adult - but they grew up on a diet of sexless, bloodless superhero violence in comics, and regard that as being the only appropriate material for comics. Long drawn-out super-battles, that's fine. Sex, that's dirty.

More accurately speaking, the Anglophone cultures regard sex as being something *private*, and preferably at least nominally romantic. Any *public* allusion to sex is taboo, hedged around with a multitude of social restrictions. Why is an everyday activity without which none of us would be here is held to be taboo? That's beyond the scope of a magazine about comics. So this article will look at just a few examples of sex comics in some different cultures - some Anglophone, some not - and

TIERRA DE PAJARO...

BETO/91



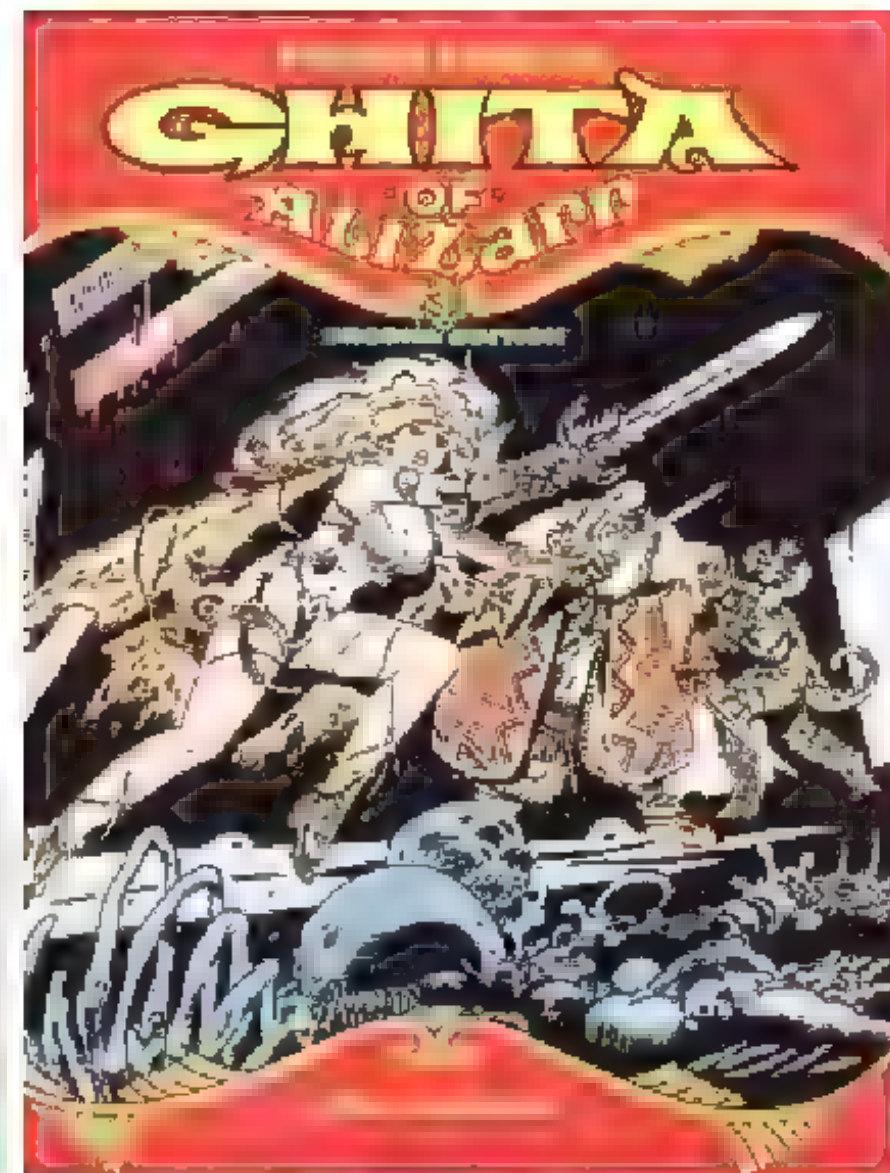
Sex or violence? Gilbert Hernandez offers one opinion

show how their content, the attitude they appear to express towards sex and the social acceptability of the genre all tend to vary between cultures.

HARD OR SOFT?

Sexual content in all media varies in intensity, and various more or less vague terms are used to describe different levels of intensity. The difference between “hardcore” and “softcore” is straightforward enough – “hardcore” material clearly shows insertion of the penis into any female (or male) orifice, while “softcore” material may imply insertion quite clearly but doesn’t show it. Making a rather hard and fast connection between terms, this article uses the term “hardcore/pornographic” and “softcore/erotic” to distinguish roughly between types of sex comic.

Right, then. Let’s begin with an



The cover for a 1980s edition emphasises the sword and sorcery genre element more than the sex side



A sketch which captures the opposition between sex and the sword in Ghita

American “classic”.

GHITA – EROTICISM OF WORD AND DESIGN

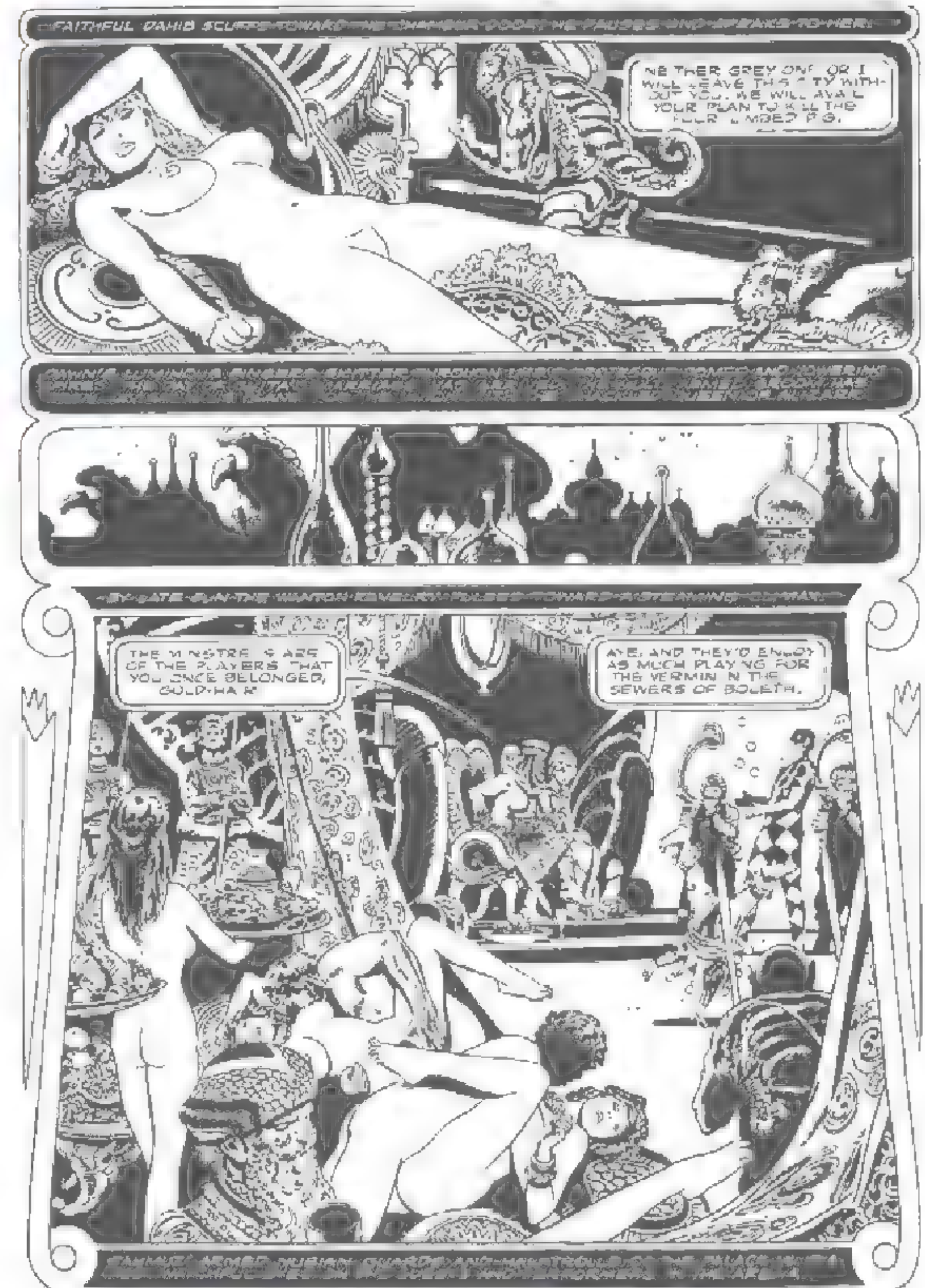
Veteran American artist Frank Thorne’s **Ghita of Alizarr** definitely falls within the softcore/erotic camp, with a particularly thorough comics-specific emphasis on the erotic. That’s one thing that makes it of interest here. Another is that Thorne adapted a genre, sword and sorcery, familiar from the mainstream American comics and injected into it the sexual elements that the Comics Code forbids – a peculiarly American approach to sex comics.

After twenty or so years as a journeyman artist, Thorne

suddenly found fame and fan acclaim when he got the job of drawing **Red Sonja**, a Conan the Barbarian spin-off character, for Marvel Comics in the early 1970s. Eventually dumped from the series, allegedly because writer/editor Roy Thomas was unhappy with his sexy vision of a deliberately sexless character, Thorne eventually got the chance to work up his own vision of what that character could be, without Comics Code and Marvel editing restrictions, for the Warren adult comics magazine **1984** (later **1994**). The result, *Ghita of Alizarr*, has been translated into several European languages and has most recently been reprinted in full by Eros Comix in 2001.

Red Sonja had been hobbled by Marvel with an origin story in which rape was followed by a gift of power from a goddess – power with which to avenge her rape, but which would be lost forever unless she remained celibate. It

was a convenient device for avoiding Comics Code disapproval, but conceptually it clearly implied that sex and power were incompatible. By contrast, the “power” of Ghita’s is an invasive masculine consciousness



For Ghita Thorne devised an ornate, sensuously curving style of page layout which enhances the erotic impact of the work.



Lann, Frank Thorne's creation for Heavy Metal



resulting from rape by a legendary, reanimated warrior, and is expressed throughout the comic in terms of sexual conflict. The heroine constantly refers to her sword as “a steel cock”, even using it to masturbate; when not controlled by the masculine element she chooses to remind herself of her essential femininity by making love. Thorne thus sets up a contrast between that oft-matched pair, sex and violence, refined to become a passionate conflict between a violent male principle and a regenerative female one. He goes no further in addressing sexual politics, though; nor is this what makes the comic erotic.

Sexual encounters, of a non-political (and non-politically correct) kind, naturally permeate a comic in which the heroine is a prostitute turned warrior: in other respects its story is straight out of the mainstream sword and sorcery genre, replete with semi-savage prehistoric races, trollish armies,

wizards and monstrous entities. The very fact that a scenario familiar to any fan of **Conan the Barbarian** is shot through with graphic scenes of casual, cheerful sex creates a sense of the erotic merely by combining the known with the proscribed. But Thorne's remarkable writing and page design much further heighten the eroticism. The verbal text consists of a dialect fabricated from poetic diction, newly coined words and earthy, scatological terms; it is indescribably delirious, matching the narrative's frequent pairing of sex, drunkenness and savagery with uninhibited diction. And the whole package is wrapped up in elaborate, constantly shifting page layouts, panels outlined in swathes of curving lines which add a richly baroque frame to Thorne's already sensual linework. In every respect it impacts on the readers' senses – fulfilling the broadest meaning of the term “erotic”.

Incidentally, the Eros collection

of **Ghita** starts with a long and glowing preface by noted comics historian and critic R.C. Harvey, who concludes that it is worth reading primarily because of Thorne's personal craftsmanship and ability to create well-realised characters – two qualities which, in theory, should surely be possessed by almost anyone working in mainstream comics. It's tempting to assume that **Ghita** has received some Anglophone critical attention not because it is a sex comic but because in other respects it is very similar to a mainstream US comics genre, with sex thrown in as just an extra plot mechanism which happens to be subversive. Certainly it functions in that way – although to assume that is its sole purpose is to ignore the outright eroticism of Thorne's design and line and his open celebration of sex as an antidote to excessive violence.

HEAVY METAL - SEXY SF FOR SALE

Thorne's next major project after **Ghita** was **Lann**, a science fiction series in **Heavy Metal** magazine which followed much the same tactic of inserting sex as a key story element into a standard American comics genre. By the early 1980s that tactic had become a standard ploy in **Heavy Metal**; it remains so to this day.

The magazine had originated in the 1970s as a vehicle for American reprints of European material from Les Humanoïdes' **Metal Hurlant**. For the first few years it focussed on the work of **MH** stars such as Moebius and Philippe Druillet, with additional strips by US



A typical HM cover image

“underground” alumni like Paul Kirschner, but eventually it widened its scope to include translations/reprints from many European sources. In a general sense it is perhaps unfortunate that **Heavy Metal** selects

material from a fairly narrow band of material – post-apocalyptic and cyberpunk stories with hefty doses of sex – since its widespread availability in the USA, and the comparative difficulty of finding much other

European material, has left many Anglophone readers with the impression that European comics are *all* about sexy SF.

Since **Heavy Metal** is distributed via newsstands, the material it reprints has to be softcore/erotic. Some stories that involve hardcore depictions of sex are included, notably the work of Italian artist Paulo Eleuteri Serpieri, but they are heavily censored for magazine publication, though not in subsequent album collections

(see the censorship appendix to this article). Serpieri's **Morbus Gravis** series, originally a post-apocalyptic series with a strong female character which, as it progressed, focussed more and more on the sexual exploits of the heroine, Druuna - see <http://www.druuna.net/> - is, though, an extreme example of a SF series in which hardcore sex became a dominant element. Most of the **Heavy Metal** regulars follow the same kind of lines as the popular Spanish artist Alfonso Azpiri

(<http://azpiri.free.fr>), turning in material that is explicit but softcore and always keeps the focus on genre-based action stories in which sex occurs mainly as interludes. Although the magazine is often filled with lush and splendidly constructed imagery, it rarely showcases comics that exploit the possibilities of erotic design and genre subversion as comprehensively

as does Thorne's **Ghita**. More often than not the sex component is kept safely extrinsic to the story material, providing little more than an element of titillation which might seem gratuitous were it not probably a necessary element in an Anglophone comics magazine marketed for men.

Thorne's work celebrates sex and places it in opposition to violence: **Heavy Metal** sells violence mixed liberally with sex as the stuff of the "adult fantasy" as which it defines its core subject matter. Although Thorne uses American mainstream comicbook techniques and genres in telling his story, **Heavy Metal** ultimately cleaves closer to that mainstream by amping up that appeal of power fantasies that seems to underlie the enormously popularity of the superhero genre. Despite the frequent softcore depictions of sex in its pages, it may best be thought of as a "sexy" comic rather than a sex comic, since more often than not its contributors depict sex as an adjunct to power, either as a "reward" for its exercise or as an intermission in between episodes of violence. The notion that sex in itself might be a means to power without violence is occasionally implied, but never developed - perhaps because such a notion might be *too* subversive? For Anglophone comics, perhaps. In Europe, though, there's a body of work that deals explicitly with sex as a means to power, and in so doing opens a wider range of narrative possibilities for the sex comics.

G. LÉVIS - CONTOURS OF POWER

Thorne's work seduces the comics

reader largely by employing eroticism to subvert expectations of an American comic. In France, where eroticism has been a valid element of the adult comics medium since the early 1960s and Jean-Claude Forest's **Barbarella**,

many varieties of sex comic have been produced, and while style may attract, mere subversion is in itself hardly enough to win an audience. In the work of the pseudonymous and highly regarded "G. Lévis", eroticism is



Alfonzo Azpiri captures the HM blend of sex with violence



The covers for sex comics generally indicate the general nature of the contents, but rarely any specific details



in fact largely abandoned; in its place is a curiously provocative blend of pornography and philosophy.

Like Frank Thorne, Jean Sidobre had a long and fairly unspectacular career in comics, working primarily on French weekly titles for children and as an illustrator for Hachette's "Bibliothèque Rose" juvenile library from the late 1940s until the mid 1970s. In 1978 he adopted the pseudonym "G. Lévis" and commenced *Les Aventures de Liz et Beth*, a sex comics series for Editions Dominique Leroy (much of it translated into English in three Eros albums as *Liz and Beth*), continued sporadically until shortly before his sudden death in 1988. During the 1980s he also collaborated as Lévis with future *L'Echo des Savanes* editor Francois Leroi on a number of

pornographic satires, notably *Les Perles de l'Amour*, parodying the kind of girls' comics he'd drawn in the 1940s, and *Propres Filles Modeles*, a wickedly sharp satire on the very prim, conservative 19th century French children's classic of the same name written by the Comtesse de Segur: but although the satires show off his lush, illustrative style of art, the more sketchily drawn *Liz et Beth* albums are of far deeper interest.

Sex comics depict sex as being primarily pleasurable, rather than as a means of procreation – as is examined later on in this article, this is because they serve a utilitarian purpose as an aid to fantasy. But what *makes* sex pleasurable, other than the basic physical sensation of it? Each individual brings his or her own agendas, desires, and preferences to a sexual encounter: this offers to the creator of "realist" sex

involves conscious application of power and control in order to gain knowledge. This is not to say that its pages are full of rape scenes in which sex is pleasurable for the aggressor and far from it for the victim, or devoted to depicting sado-masochism and the paraphernalia of bondage, although the artist does examine the proposition that sexual stimulation applied in excess of what the recipient wants ceases to be pleasurable. Rather, Liz and Beth and their numerous partners generally approach sex – or withhold it – out of a desire to control, or to be controlled, or to gain information from one another. Time and again Lévis shows the activity to be pleasurable at least in part because it is a means to an extrinsic end: the acquisition of power and knowledge that are subsequently used to determine ensuing events and activities. And in doing he touches on the theories of social history proposed by the postmodernist French philosopher Michel Foucault.

Foucault suggested that history should be viewed not as a linear succession of events but as a series of "epistemes", eras in which changing structures of power, applied through specific knowledge privileged, define what is included in, and excluded from, the social norm. In effect he argued that rationalism must establish excluded aspects of social behaviour, usually labelling them as "mad", "sick" or "criminal", against which to define itself as a normative value. Similarly, although on an individual level rather than a social one, *Liz et*



comics a multiplicity of possible narrative frameworks within which to present the graphic depictions of sex required for utilitarian purposes.

In *Liz et Beth* Lévis examines one of those possible narratives in some detail – the notion that sex

Above: Sex applied as a means of control, to gain information. The text reads: "N-no! Don't stop!" "Don't stop? So you're giving the orders now? I'm in the habit of doing just what I want, young Bastien!" "Please, carry on! I-I'll tell you everything." "Very well, tell me while I'm stroking you. But if you stop, I'll stop too!" "That'll be difficult while you... and while I..." "Oh no, no – so do you talk, or do I leave?" "Don't go! I swear that what I'll tell you is true, even if it doesn't seem possible to you."

Right: Excessive application of unwanted stimulation is a torture to the victim. Translation: "Only a quarter of an hour, and you're wanting me to stop? Don't say it's unpleasant – at least, not yet. But have a little patience, and you'll understand what I mean..." "Oooohhh it's... that's enough... I can't take any more... AH!!!"

Beth demonstrates how the primal pleasure of sex may be applied in order to gain power and knowledge with which personal problems may be resolved in the “best” way, which is itself defined by the alternative, the “worst” possible resolution (an alternative which can only be averted by

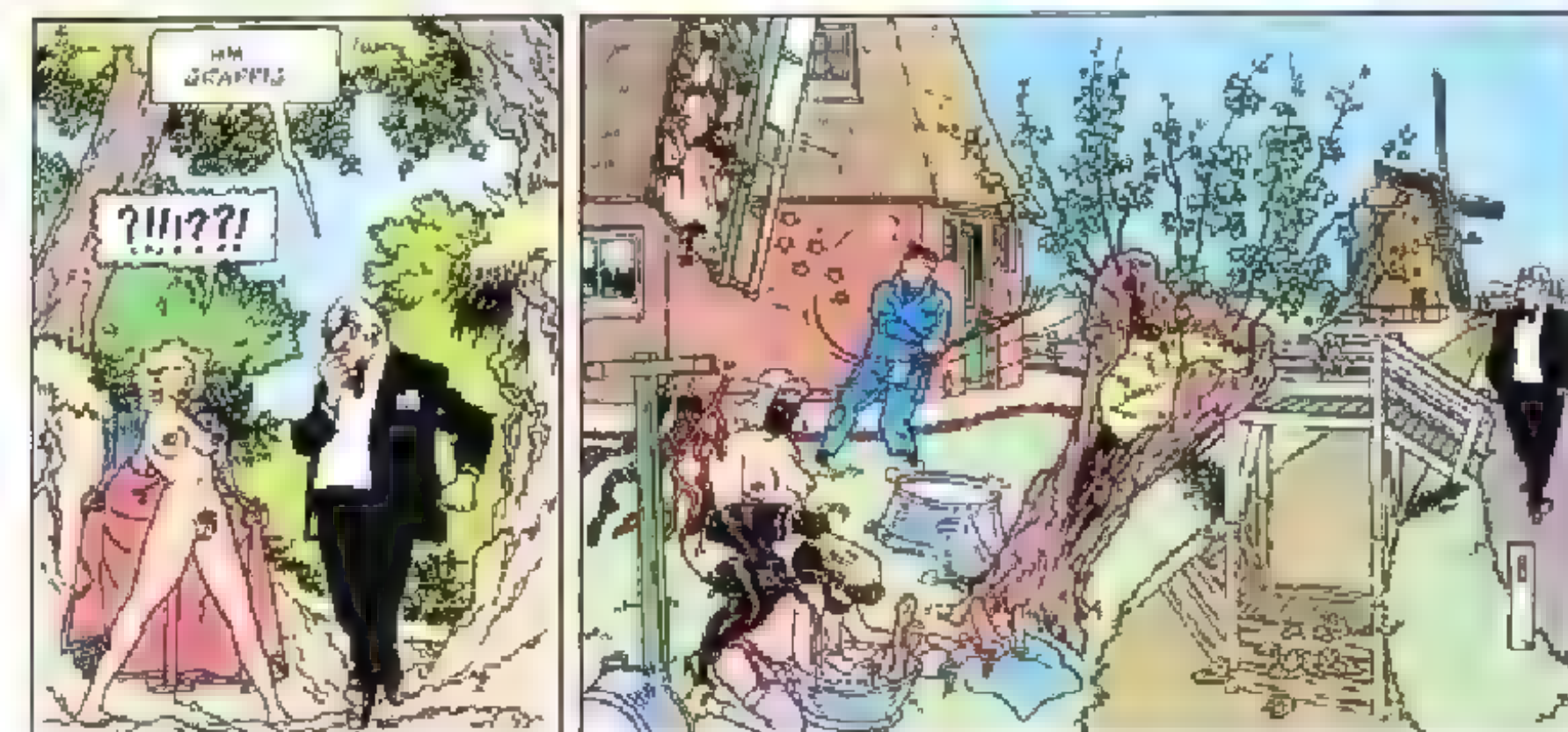
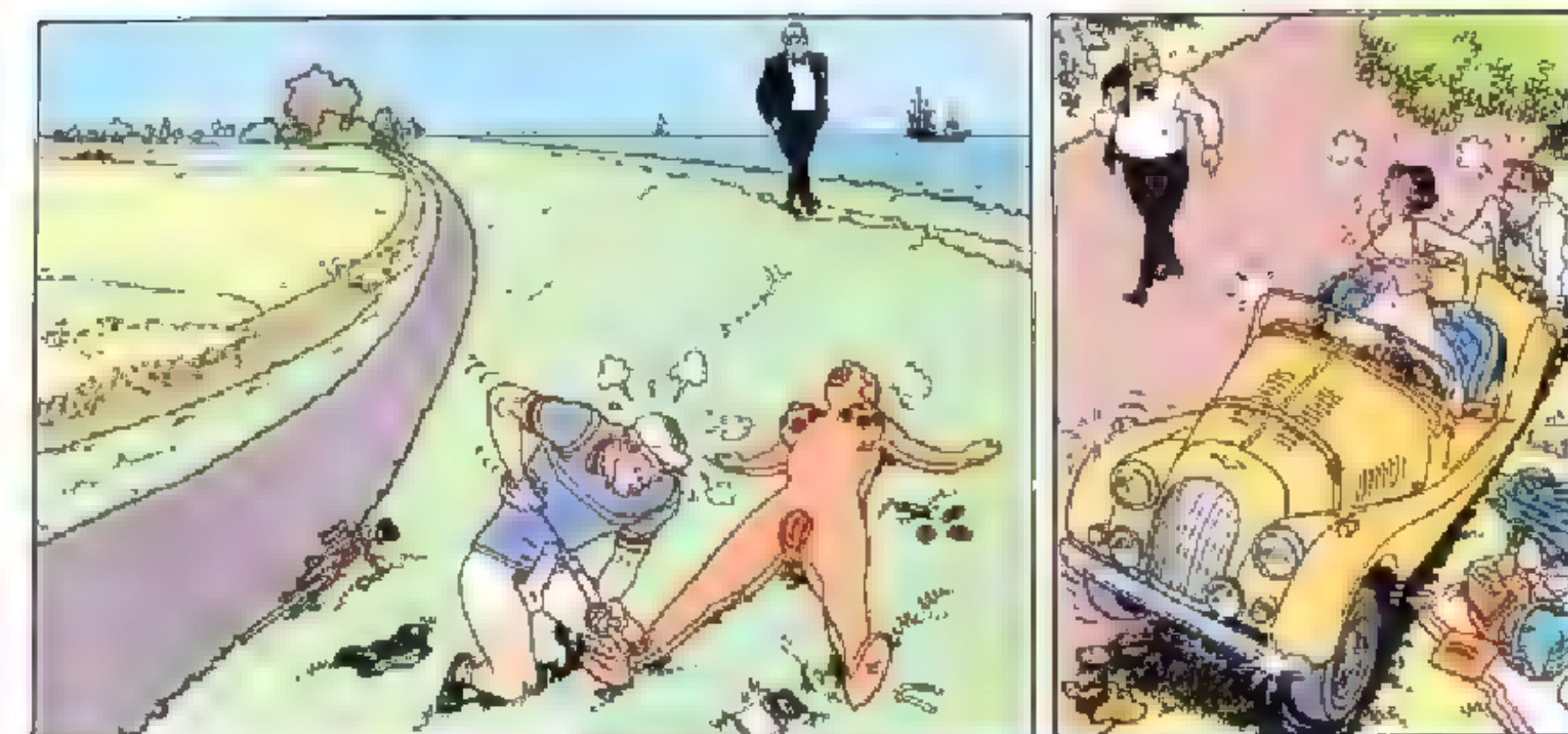
control, specifically that availed by sex). On quite another level it can be observed that Lévis demonstrates this within the context of a genre, sex comics, which is itself excluded in the Foucaultian sense from Anglophone societies! He also appears to fulfil another of

Foucault’s theories: that the artist is one who stands outside any given “episteme” and uses art to comment upon what it includes and excludes. This raises another proposition, which the next few sections will examine in different contexts: that sex comics are, according the Foucaultian system, an art form – and thus a means of comment and definition - characteristic of our current “episteme”.

A NICE WALK WITH THEO VAN DEN BOOGARD

Theo van den Boogard, one of the most popular and “artistic” producers of Dutch comics for adults, started out in underground papers of the 1960s such as *Hitweek* and *Aloha*, where his work gradually shifted away from stoned and psychedelic humour towards criticism of social taboos, particularly concerning sex. His only extended work that could be described as an outright sex comic, **Ans en Hans krijgen de kans** (1970), is a hilarious underground romp through Hans’ first experience of sex with the rather more knowledgeable Ans, cast ironically as a public display complete with a sports-style commentator and developed into a critique of “the establishment”’s deliberate transformation of sex from a vital experience to just another marketable commodity.

During the 1970s van den Boogard and TV writer/produced Wim T. Schippers developed **Sjef Van Oekel**, a series that broke through into the mainstream while retaining distinctly underground sensibilities. “Sjef van Oekel” was an absurdist parody of a TV



Van den Boogard and Schippers' absurdist yet respectable-looking commentator on society, Sjef Van Oekel, enjoys a nice walk in the country. Van den Boogard's work in the style of Hergé has been described as “blasphemous”.

presenter, created for television by Schippers and played by comedian Dolf Brouwers to such acclaim that he was actually given his own pop music programme, *Van Oekel's Discohoek*, to present (treating the Dutch TV viewers to sights such as the dignified, white-haired and formal dress-clad Van Oekel crawling around the studio floor staring up inside disco diva Donna Summer's skirt...). The comic was a spin-off from this TV project – but with van den Boogard on board, the character of van Oekel was projected outside the TV studio to become an absurdist commentator on Dutch society and

taboos. The absurdity was given an extra frisson by van den Boogard's adoption of the Hergé/Joost Swarte “clear line” style, and colouring applied by former **Tintin** colourist France Ferrari; as you can see from the nearby sample, the result looks like a world that Hergé certainly never made...

It's also a non-judgemental world, at least so far as the artist is concerned: at the end of this strip Van Oekel simply comments “That was a nice walk - I'll go back the same way!” and leaves the readers to draw their own conclusions. This is typical of van den Boogard's mature style. **Ans**



Van den Boogard included several striking visualisations of sex as an industrial commodity in **Ans en Hans** (1970)



Via the idea of a child's misconception, van den Boogard shows how visiting prostitutes may be socially accepted, but can still be embarrassing.

en Hans was a young man's passionate diatribe, but the artist subsequently learned to take the more Foucaultian approach of depicting extreme situations and leaving interpretation to others. Van Oekel, as an extreme creation in himself – an anarchic “outsider” who looks utterly respectable – was a fine vehicle for this, but the same tendency is also evident in the 1980s strips collected as **Joost mag het weten** (“Joost wants to know”). Joost is a young, imaginative boy who tends to draw the wrong conclusions when his parents answer his questions. In one strip he runs

weeping to the local police station to announce that there's incest in the family – his father is sleeping with his mother! In another Joost's parents explain the concept of a fashion show to him; later, as they take a short cut through the town centre and Joost runs ahead, his father finds his young son in the middle of the town's red light district, pointing at a corseted prostitute and yelling “Take this one for mommy! She'll love it!”. It's a “comedy of embarrassment”, in which the joke lies purely in the difference between juvenile and adult perceptions; how each situation will ultimately be resolved

for Joost is left undetermined. The scene in the red light street is particularly interesting; no comment on the morality or otherwise of prostitution is at all implied, but discomfiture and annoyance, directed at the father, are clearly evident in the faces of the prostitutes' clients. If a sin has been committed, it is one of disclosure (and to an innocent!). As we'll see in both the next paragraph and the next section, it appears that in the Dutch view extra-marital sexual activity may be socially included – but being caught in the act is definitely excluded.

Another, non-series, story included in the **Joost** collection needs to be mentioned because it goes a little further. In *Wat?*, a teenage son goes out for the evening, evading telling his parents that he's going to see a punk band named Gerrit and The Fuckers. After the gig, he's inspired to round up his pals and they all race noisily home to yell the band's name out loud to the

entire street... only to find, in a splendidly orchestrated finale, their act of teenage rebellion being undermined by the revelation that, during the course of the evening, his father has ended up across the street making love with a bachelor neighbour while his mother enjoys carnal relations with the family dog. Bestiality is not particularly common in the sex comics, but it



Teenage rebellion as an anti-social act pales compared with the exposure of what goes on in the home behind closed curtains in *Wat?*

does occur. However, the genre has its own inclusions and exclusions, and while lesbianism is very much an inclusion (and a common fantasy for heterosexual

males), homosexuality is almost always excluded. Van den Boogard's rarity in being both a mainstream cartoonist and one who treats heterosexuality and

homosexuality on equal terms thus emphasises the point that most sex comics are produced primarily for a male, heterosexual audience.

ROOIE OORTJES – SEX AS PLAY

Rooie Oortjes, published in The Netherlands since the early 1990s, is a “men’s magazine”, more or less in the century-old tradition of popular “saucy” periodicals. A scan of its website - <http://www.rooieoortjes.nl> - conveys the general idea; a collection of comics, jokes, puzzles, spoof agony columns and music/film/comics reviews, its quarterly album collections of strips are steady bestsellers in The Netherlands and are published in eight different languages (in English by NBM, under the title **Grin and Bare It**). The most notable of the regular contributors is Daniel Henrotin (always known as Dany), a classic Franco-Belgian artist whose most famous creation - *Olivier Rameau*, created with Greg for **Tintin Magazine** in 1968 - has a massive mural devoted to it in the centre of Brussels. Once again we come across an established artist of comics for children who turned to sex comics later in life... Other prominent contributors include Bruno Di Sano and the Turkish artist Gürcan Gürsel.

Like the British monthly **Viz**, **Rooie Oortjes** seems not to be targeted at adult comics fans, but at adults who enjoyed comics when they were kids. The emphasis is entirely on a humorous approach, in which brightly cartooned images of ordinary people walk through simple, one page scenarios set in everyday locations – the home, the workplace, the countryside, the cafes – and inevitably wind up at a punchline in the final panel. The gags are of the kind that are told in the pub; about dumb blondes, not-so-dumb blondes, penis size, old men fooled by young wives, cunning bosses and conniving doctors getting their comeuppance. There are no recurring characters, just frequently recurring types. It’s the kind of lightweight sex humour that is familiar throughout the world – but mixed in with copious softcore depictions of sexual activity.

Taken as an artistic, specifically pop culture representation of a culture’s inclusions and exclusions as regards sex (a Foucaultian meta-episteme), **Rooie Oortjes** is notable in that it emphasises much the same points as does Theo van den Boogard’s more high cultural work. Men and women enjoy sex outside marriage, and prostitutes are available to provide it (much as restaurants exist to cater to a bodily need for food); this is nothing new in any culture, but here it is unmistakably a social



A collection of commonplace Rooie Oortjes gags... about a cuckolded husband... about small penis size... and about casual sex outside marriage.



The cover of the first issue of Rooie Oortjes, by Dany. The phrase “voor de jeugd van 17 tot 77 jaar” (“for boys aged 17 to 77”) parodied the sub-heading of the Dutch edition of Tintin Magazine

inclusion, an almost entirely guilt-free proposition. Guilt is a major indication in Anglophone cultures of the social exclusion of extra-marital sex; as in van den Boogard's comics, in the cultural range of **Rooie Oortjes** it is only getting caught in the act that excludes a man from the social norm. In short, the magazine's strips assert, over and over again, that extra-marital sex might not be approved, but it is understood and is tolerated so long as it is not satisfied too blatantly. Possibly this guilt-free attitude is responsible for the very cheerful, relaxed nature of the **Rooie Oortjes** humour. It is not universally tolerant, though – among exclusions from the norm, and thus objects of ridicule, are small penises, female unattractiveness, and the folly of cuckolds. **Rooie Oortjes** thus remains conventional in terms of any Western culture in assigning sex primarily to the young, handsome and well endowed.

CLARA DE NOCHE –SEX AS WORK

The Spanish comic **Clara De Noche** (<http://www.historietasargentinas.com/historietas/trillo-maicas-bernet/claradenoche/>) also offers tolerant, populist view of extra-marital sex but with a tougher slant than is seen in **Rooie Oortjes**. Written for Ervin Rustemagic's Strip Art Features by Carlos Trillo and Eduardo Maicas, and drawn by Jordi Bernet, it is widely syndicated throughout Europe and South America. Bernet is another internationally famous artist drawing sex comics after a long



Advert for the Greek album editions of Clara De Noche

career, in which he has drawn for publishers all around the world (his most recent American work was a **Batman: Black and White** story scripted by Howard Chaykin). He generally draws in a gritty, "realist" style, but for **Clara De Noche** he combines that with a looser, cartoony approach, a combination that allows for a great deal of inflection and subtlety. Like **Rooie Oortjes**, it consists of short gag strips, usually two pages in length, and the emphasis is on humour – but it is centred on a recurring cast of characters. The main one, Clara, is a prostitute who looks remarkably like 1950s American

strip may generally take a humorous view of it, but never evades the fact that the prostitute is there to make money, not to have fun. Clara always smiles charmingly and flatters her clients, but the art markedly contrasts the energetic humping of the men with her own detached passivity, and the scripting emphasises her concentration on getting paid according to her complex system of tariffs. The tough, uncompromising realism of that is allayed by episodes which depict her loving relationship with her little son, and her permanently unfulfilled longing for a man who

men's magazine model Bettie Page; when Eros Comix published a few episodes in US comicbook format, they retitled it **Betty By The Hour**. Other regular characters include Clara's young son and one of her fellow prostitutes, and the anecdotal strips all depict events in the daily round of Clara's working and domestic life.

This leads to a rather different kind of emphasis from that in **Rooie Oortjes**. Sex is Clara's job: the

will love her and be a father to him – a powerful modifier, because it is perhaps the most common fantasy entertained about prostitutes by the romantically-inclined – but the overall narrative is a light but unromantic one of a hard-working professional.

As a signifier of cultural attitudes, **Clara De Noche** offers a more complex, concentrated picture than **Rooie Oortjes**. The heroine is charming and sympathetic, but definitely excluded from the social norm: social workers accuse her of traumatising her child, the local housewives refuse to talk to her, and to men she is just a vehicle for their own satisfaction. On the other hand the hypocrisy of her exclusion is sometimes touched on; in a number of episodes it is

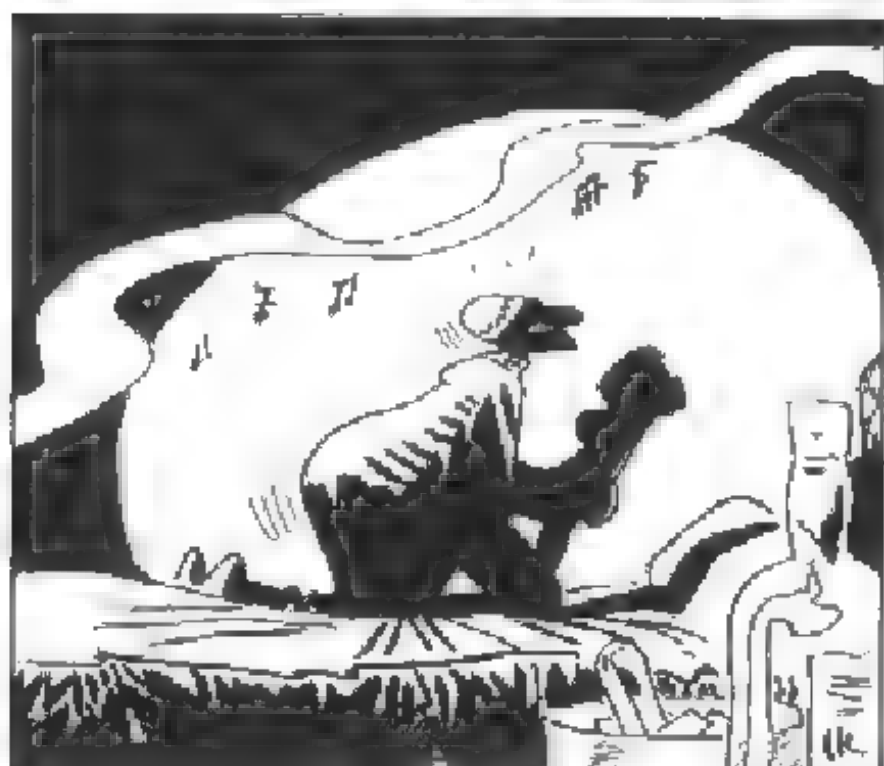
contrasted with the social inclusion of other women who employ sex to get on in their own professions. If a conclusion can be drawn, it may be that while the male need for sex is conceded, and the male enjoyment of sex is evident, those who provide the sex are forever excluded from the social norm, even if it is clear that in essence they are simply doing a job and earning a living like everyone else. Ultimately, **Clara De Noche** suggests a social episteme in which romantic sex may be an acceptable impossibility, which is defined by its unacceptable opposite, the ready provision of sex for money.

* * * * *

So far the sex comics considered serve one or another kind of



Clara and her little son in search of a husband and father.



A day in the sex industry – Clara at work.

narrative purpose within which sex is to a greater or lesser degree a component. In **Ghita** sex is a plot device that subverts and enlivens a genre piece. Lévis' work employs sexual power relations as a theme that offers an artistic comment on society. **Rooie Oortjes** and **Clara De Noche** present a view of society

embodied in a humorous view of sexual feelings and stratagems. Theo van den Boogard's entire output encompasses both Lévis' fine art/philosophical stance and the humorous populism of material like **Rooie Oortjes** and **Clara De Noche**. But what of those sex comics that are apparently produced solely for the

solitary reader in search of stimulation, with no further aim?

W.G. COLBER – THE SHOCK OF UTILITY

Anglophone assessment of quality in comics generally focusses on the skill demonstrated by artists and writers in constructing a narrative that entertains the mind and eye. But sex comics have an extra, utilitarian purpose – to excite sexual fantasy. Some years ago an artist friend of mine submitted a proposal and art samples to Eros Comix: the rejection letter he received explained simply that the editor hadn't had an erection when reading the proposal. The point is clear – a sex comic may be badly drawn, poorly written and in general aesthetically feeble, but if its reader is aroused by it then it is an effective comic in utilitarian terms.

There are large numbers hardcore/pornographic sex comics circulating throughout Europe, many of them originating in France, Spain or Italy, pseudonymously produced (exceptions notably include those by Milo Manara and Guido Crepax) and published by specialist firms such as Editions CAP (Switzerland) and Uitgeverij Sombroero (The Netherlands - <http://www.sombrerobooks.nl/>). They appear to be devoted to displaying extremely graphic depictions of just about every sexual activity you might care to think of, and several you wouldn't. Aesthetic qualities like narrative, characterisation, dialogue and even subtext are very secondary indeed; different critical methods than the usual

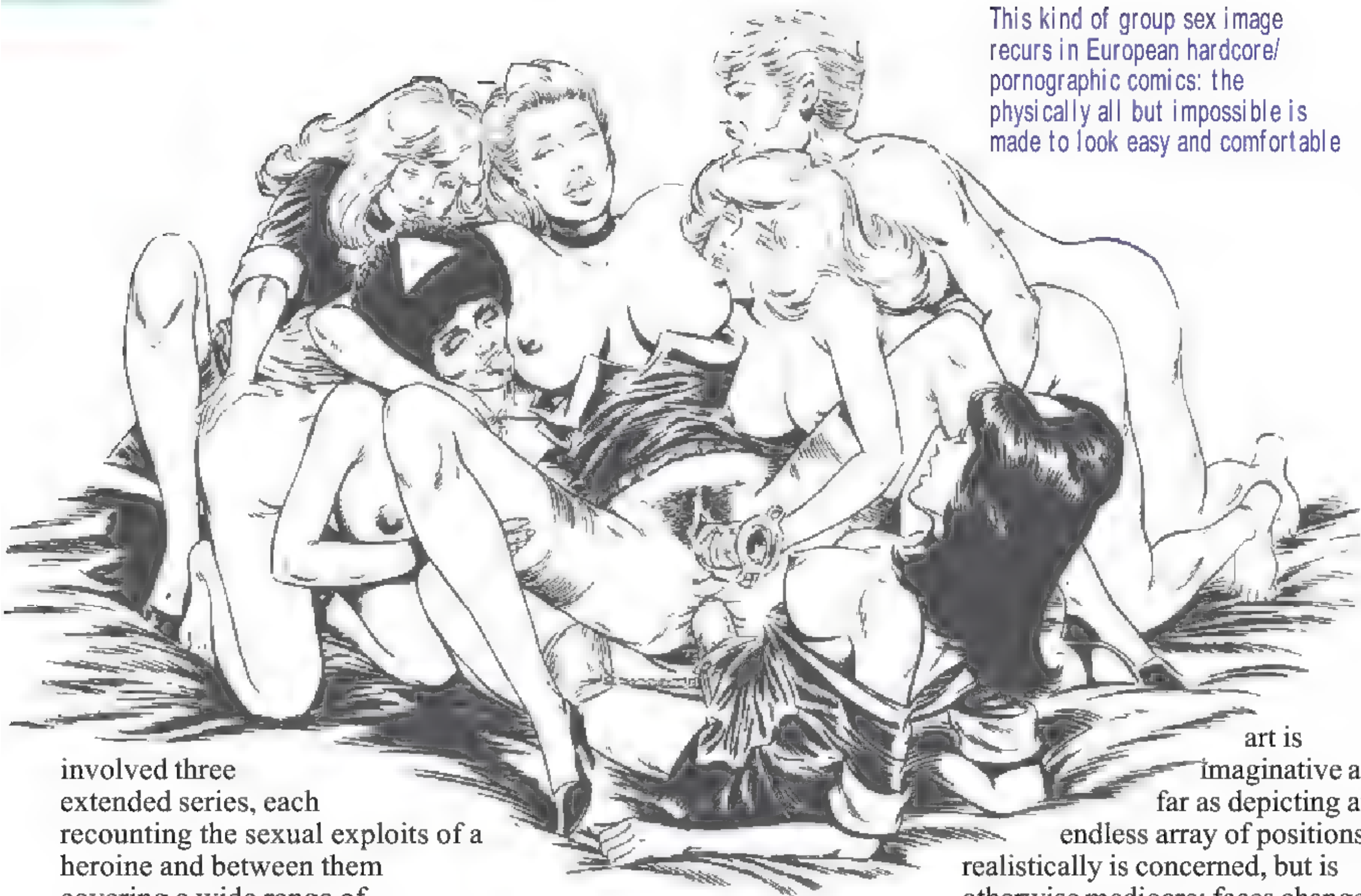
ones are required to assess them.

One of the more prolific authors of these albums is the mysterious "W.G Colber". One online source claims that the name is a pseudonym for the otherwise unknown Robert Hugues and that

Hugues also used the surname "Mancini"; if that's true then this author would appear to have written and drawn a remarkable forty or fifty hardcore albums during the 1980s and early 1990s! Colber's output primarily



A typical cover for a Colber album – more suggestive than explicit



This kind of group sex image recurs in European hardcore/pornographic comics: the physically all but impossible is made to look easy and comfortable

involved three extended series, each recounting the sexual exploits of a heroine and between them covering a wide range of preoccupations and activities. The “Cleo” series follows the sexual career of a young girl; inevitably the early albums also depict the activities of paedophiles. The “Nada” series concerns the career of a prostitute who trains newcomers to the profession places particular emphasis on the use of numerous sex aids, exploitation of every position in and out of the Kama Sutra, and on sado-masochistic exploits. The most straightforward – also the least extensive – is **Lydia, Soubrette Deluxe** (<http://www.sombrerobooks.nl/easysubpage0034.html>). Just as the emphasis on female lead characters might seem to imply,

Colber is considered to be a specialist in lesbian scenes.

In case it isn’t clear by now, these comics are, to be blunt, solely about depicting people fucking, in as many positions and group configurations as possible. **Lydia** follows the career of a chambermaid in a hotel full of randy, sexually imaginative guests and staff – and that summary tells you the entire plot of a multi-album sequence. Characterisation is non-existent. The dialogue consists mostly of moans, grunts and directions as to what to put where and how hard to put it, with a few additional links intended to move the scene along from one group session to the next. Colber’s

art is imaginative as far as depicting an endless array of positions realistically is concerned, but is otherwise mediocre; faces change appearance and even shape from panel to panel, bodies are constantly misproportioned, backgrounds are minimal and perspective is weak. It’s hard to see what can possibly be gained by anyone simply reading this work for aesthetic enjoyment. It is clearly designed primarily to be read while masturbating, or perhaps by couples in search of a few ideas for variations.

And in that respect it’s arguably

a very effective use of the medium. As a narrative blank slate it offers a huge range of visual stimulation – including the breaking of many taboos and, in some cultures, laws – to the solitary fantasist without hampering with any unnecessary distractions or condemning in any way the drift of his or her fantasies. Ageism, sexism, and racism – all of which may occasionally be detected in the other sex comics discussed above – are absent; in Colber’s pages the young, the old and the ugly of all races enthusiastically engage in non-stop sex. The overall effect is less that of a comics narrative than of a zero budget porn movie, and in that respect also the advantages of the comics medium are evident. Just as filmmakers must go to great expense to create an image of a superhero in flight when a comics artist can draw one convincingly in minutes, so in Colber’s comics every male can have a foot long penis two inches in diameter and be able to use it in the most impossible of positions and group combinations with apparent ease and grace. The result is “realistic”



Just an average-sized penis in a Colber comic



The hardcore comics do not restrict sex to the young and beautiful

in the most artificial sense of the word rather than real – but that too fits the work’s overall purpose of providing basic material for fantasy.

To close this brief survey of sex comics, let’s return to America and to a comic which is in some respects very similar to the European hardcore/pornographic material but in others transcends it so utterly as to become that rare phenomenon, a first rate comic which is packed full of sex.

BIRDLAND – A PLEA FOR LIBERATION?

Turning the wheel full circle, one of the first Eros Comix releases was a collection of sketches and other material relating to Frank Thorne’s **Ghita** (see Appendix 1).

Birdland weaves a tight, literally incestuous narrative around a core group of interlinked characters: Mark Herrera and his wife Fritz, Mark's brother Simon

It's also a highly complex experiment in narrative which manages to incorporate in some sense every manner of approach to sex comics text considered in this article so far.

THUMP THUMP

THUMP

THUMP

MARK... MARK...

HOLY SHIT! SO ITS VOICES NOW??

BANG BANG MAY HAVE GIVEN ME A BIGGER COSMIC POSE THAN I THOUGHT

MARK... MARK... PLEASE

MARK YOU BASTARD!

HAPPY WE'LL BE BEYOND THE SEA...

The cast and obsessions of Gilbert Hernandez' hardcore soap opera

rejection of sexual taboos

One thing **Birdland** isn't, though, is populist. The three issue miniseries – the Eros trade collection adds a mostly wordless one-shot which serves mostly to re-emphasise what has already been said – begins and ends with the comicbook alien abduction plot, but in between the sitcom-style developments in relationships between the characters are emphasised and all other plot elements are fragmented. Perhaps that's necessary, given that its manifesto is extremely radical; but it requires considerable decoding of a comic most of whose readers may be liable to ignore the words while concentrating on the visuals. Hernandez does his best to make the words integral to the experience – the lexicon of sound effects he assigns to various acts of coupling are hysterically funny, and the dialogue, free of all expositional material, is a splendid piece of naturalism. Ultimately, though, the irony of **Birdland** is that such a spectacularly groundbreaking example of the comics medium is probably kept hopelessly obscure by the social restrictions against which it argues. Sex, declares Hernandez, is a celebration of humanity, which should be freed from the chains of power games, and emotional manipulations in which it has been placed by its association with love, marriage, romance and gender differentiation. Sex according to the Anglophone comics industries is once again something dirty that we don't want to know about.

AND FINALLY...

That attitude is gradually





Fun with sound effects!

changing, and has been doing so for a while. Hernandez has been able to transfer some of his **Birdland** characters over to the highly respectable **Love and Rockets** title without eradicating all traces of their sexuality. Even as high profile a mainstream project as Frank Miller's recent **DK2** contained an unequivocal sexual encounter between Superman and Wonder Woman and a positive, therapeutic encounter, unlike an earlier groundbreaker, the failed encounter between the Silk Spectre and Owlman in Moore and Gibbons' **Watchmen**. But while the general Anglophone cultural attitude towards sex remains one in which it is regarded as positive while private but pornographic if public, it seems unlikely that American mainstream comics will do more than continue to prod at that particular envelope.

Should they do more? A better question might be, can they ultimately *avoid* doing more? Comics have been the target of

scathing criticism and censorship efforts in Anglophone societies for a hundred years or more. Partly that is because they have long been perceived as material for children, and so must be kept free of that which society deems to be inappropriate or the young. But a close reading of the most well known Anglophone attack on comics, Fredric Wertham's **Seduction of the Innocent**, suggests a wider concern a fear of the inherent fitness of narrative visual media for conveying extreme levels of fantasy. Wertham also criticised television in his book, but his main attack was reserved for comics, because of all visual media it is best suited to the untrammelled depiction of the imaginary. Superheroes, for instance, thrive in comics more than elsewhere because only in comics can impossible acts by impossible beings be so easily depicted and made to seem "realistic". And as the work of W.G. Colber clearly shows, comics can show extreme sexual desires and aspirations being

actualised beyond what is plausible in reality, just as easily as they can convey the powers of a Superman all that is required is an act of imaginative acceptance by the reader. And as the readership becomes gradually less juvenile and more adult, the scenarios they are asked to accept become more far-reaching and sophisticated. Just as superheroics have become more extreme, to great acclaim, in series such as **The Authority** and **The Ultimates**, it may be inevitable that the adult taste for "more and bigger" will lead to more, and more extreme, depictions of sex in comics, regardless of cultural restrictions.

But as to whether that *should* happen - the extensive web of cultural attitudes and indoctrinations makes that a question too large to be addressed here. If those attitudes and indoctrinations are ignored, there does not seem to be any inherent reason why sex comics should not be as openly read and discussed by comics fans as work in any other genre. Social taboos may and do prevent that from happening, but hopefully this article demonstrates that the subject of sex is just as capable of engendering both complex, serious narratives and sheer entertainment value as are, for obvious instance, the popular Anglophone genres of autobiography and of costumed superheroics and that far from being any kind of aberration, they may be regarded as a meta-epistemic view of present day Western society. Precisely because sex is a taboo subject, it

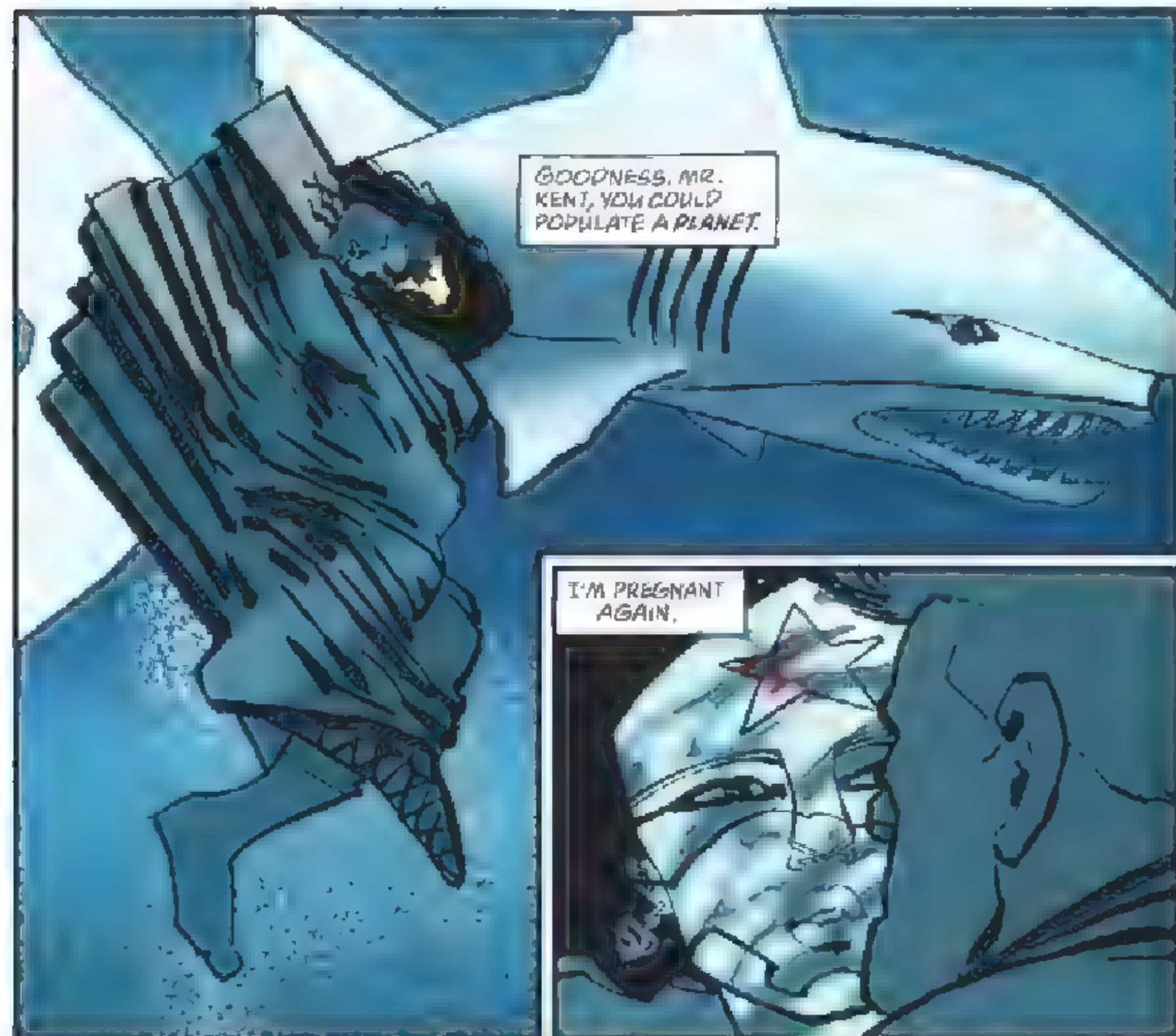
may even be more capable of generating clear and incisive social critiques than many comics

genres. But whether that means that sex comics are *worth* reading... well, that's up to you,



The final, orgasmic surrender of indoctrinated social inhibitions

isn't it? In societies where sex is confined resolutely to the private sphere, it may be inevitable that any decisions concerning any aspect of it also remain private...



Superman and Wonder Woman in Miller's DK2 still safely under wraps, but unthinkable until very recently. The Authority - about as far as sex yet goes in the US mainstream

APPENDIX 1

SO, WHAT ABOUT THE UNITED KINGDOM?

WHAT about it? Comics were accepted as being juvenile material in Britain around 100 years ago. In 1960, when Jean-Claude Forest was beginning to develop Barbarella over in France, British publisher Penguin Books was being tried under the Obscene Publications Act for publishing D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. A decade later *OZ Magazine*, an underground paper which include a few parody sex comics, was up on trial under the same law (and lost). Prosecution of underground comics and their publishers continued on a regular basis throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

By now you may have gathered that the UK has never been much of a place for publishing sex comics – with one exception. What it does have is a rich and uniquely uninhibited tradition of cheesecake art in newspaper strips. Where American newspaper comics have always excluded female nudity, the British variety has luxuriated in it ever since the *Daily Mirror* published Norman Pett's *Jane*, a strip about a pretty blonde



constantly losing her clothing which became a staggeringly popular national icon during World War II. The nude or semi-nude woman remained a stock character: a few notable later examples are illustrated here. Whether these can be described



Above: Pett's wartime series *Jane* set the style for the "sexy" British newspaper strip and just above: Mild titillation offered in the early 1960s by Jim Holdaway

as "sex comics", though, is debatable; their purpose has always been to titillate, occasionally hinting at actual sexual encounters but always stopping just short of depicting them. The present day survivors of the genre, primarily Conrad Frost and Jose Gual's *George & Lynne* (*The Sun*) but also Barrie Tomlinson and John Gillatt's soccer strip *Scorer* (*The Mirror*), are rather more openly suggestive – but still they suggest that the British very much like to look, but not at all to touch.

The single exception proving the "no sex please, we're British" rule was *Comic Strip*, a monthly anthology of sex comics spun off



Above: *The Sun*'s long-running George & Lynne shows a lot and suggests more, but that's all. Below: Tomlinson & Gillatt's football strip Scorer is occasionally as explicit as British newspaper strips ever become. Right: Paul Raymond's short-lived UK sex comic

from the men's magazine *Fiesta* for about three years at the end of the 1980s. It offered a chaotic medley of styles, all slanted towards humour and a great deal of really atrocious art, suggesting either that most of the artists (and editors) had no idea what they were doing or they were bashing it out as fast as possible for the money. The whole package suggested profound embarrassment on the part of those involved; the only redeeming features were a lushly designed adaptation of John Cleland's 18th century sex novel **Fanny Hill**, drawn by veteran UK artist Ron Tiner, and various strips by Art Wetherell featuring impossibly huge-breasted women, most of them subsequently reprinted in the USA by Eros Comix.



APPENDIX 2

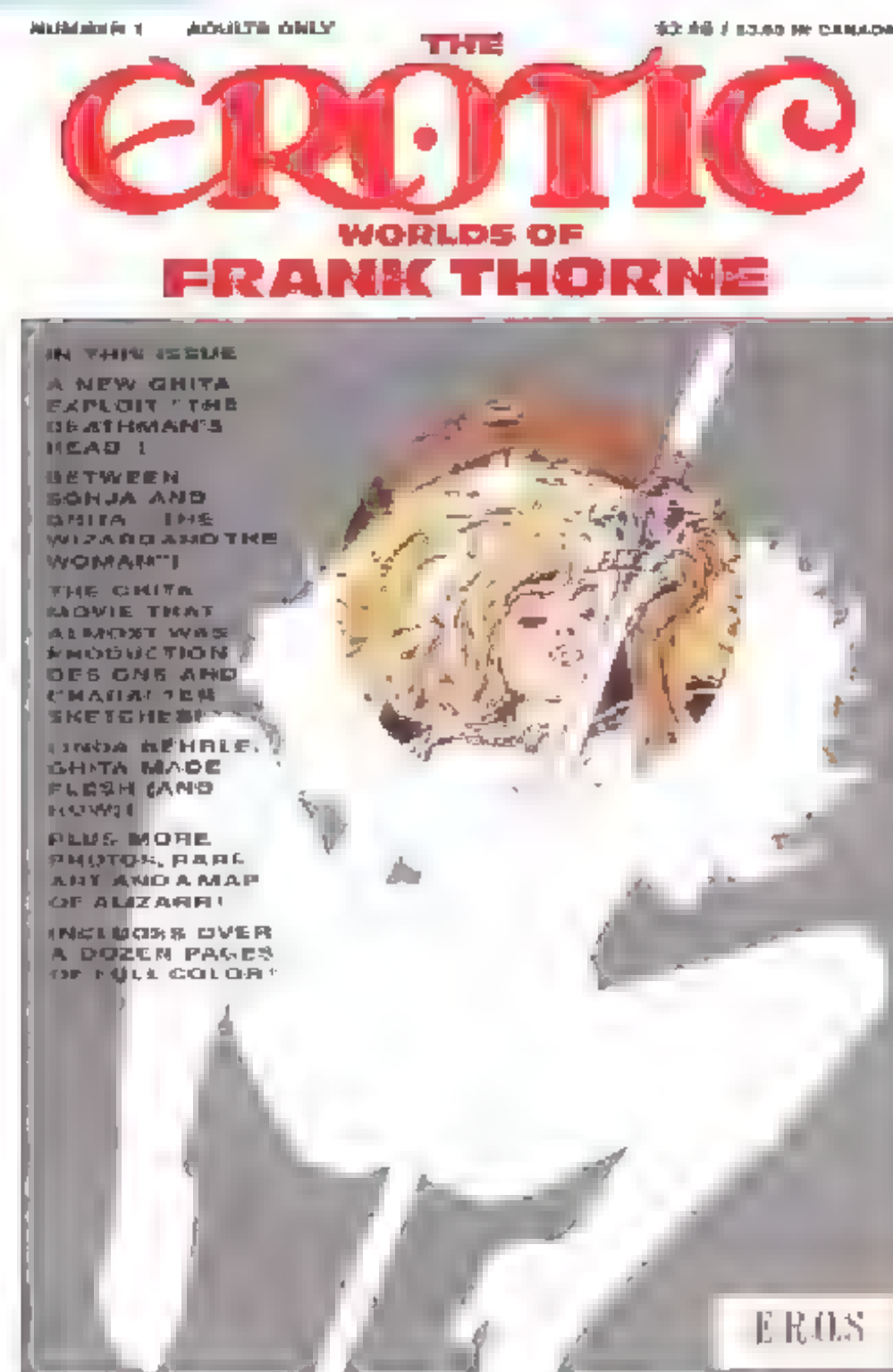
CENSORSHIP

WITH a plentiful trade going on in comics being translated and reprinted across national boundaries, it's inevitable that differing cultural attitudes lead to censorship of material. And, in case this article has appeared to suggest that Anglophone societies are repressive with regard to sex comics while in other countries they are allowed to live and let live, a couple of the examples which make up this section should demonstrate that this is not entirely the case.

However, there are two constraints that cause censorship – the moral and the legal – and the Anglophone societies tend to be the ones with the most legal restrictions. Some of the hardcore/pornographic material discussed here is illegal in the UK, and may transgress local laws in various states of the USA. Censorship in Europe is more often a matter of mutually agreed self-censorship, as applied by artists or by publishers (although there are exceptions – for example, two attempts to publish a German translation of van den Boogard's **Ans en Hans** were barred by the West German authorities).

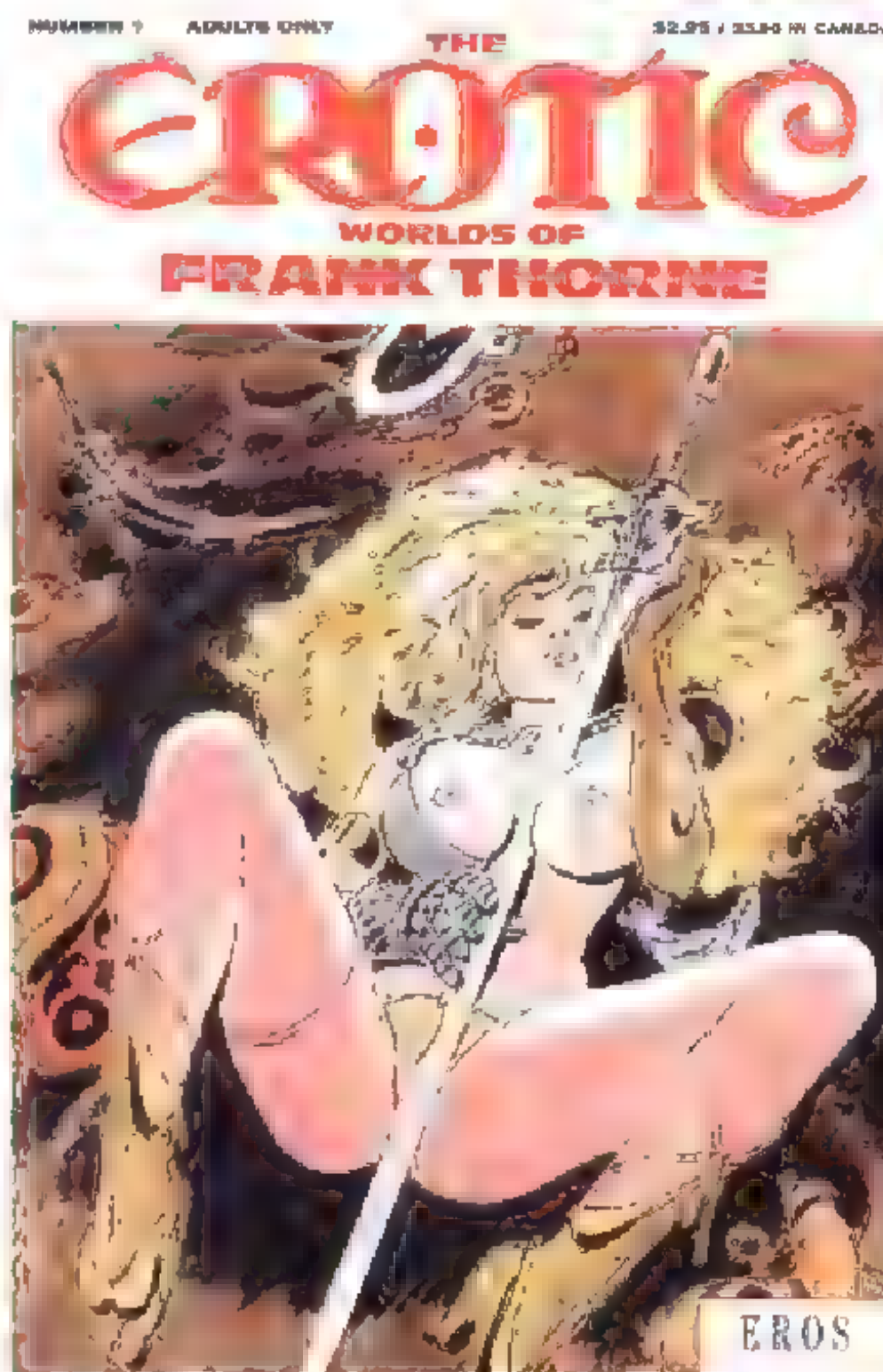
In effect, the American Comics Code also is also an industry self-censorship device, but one which consists of a codex of strictly defined prohibitions, drafted along legal lines and originally administered by a former judge. In European comics publishing there seems to be no strict set of rules, simply an acceptance that some kinds of material may be inappropriate for certain venues. Sex and excessive violence are unlikely to be found in weekly comics for children, but little if any restriction is placed on their use in albums clearly marketed for adults. As the **Garth** example in this section shows, the same principle is occasionally applied in the UK.

Is censorship necessary? It certainly seems inevitable. Some of the examples here may seem ludicrous, but each of them reflects in some way the variations between local cultural attitudes. For so long as such differing opinions about the acceptability of depicting sex remain in existence, there will undoubtedly remain those who water down comics in order to make them "safe" for everyone to read.



EROS COMIX AND GHITA

When Gary Groth and Kim Thompson launched Eros Comix in 1989, one of the first titles they published was **The Erotic Worlds of Frank Thorne**, a series reprinting the artist's sketches and other ephemera. The first issue was devoted to material featuring **Ghita**, and was published in a double cover, the outer and inner versions of which are both displayed here. At a stage when Eros was uncertain as to how distributors and retailers would handle their output, it was presumably felt that a cover unmistakably showing a woman masturbating with a sword was a risky business...



His early albums were published in English by the obvious venue for sexy SF, Heavy Metal. But as the series progressed, and with it the amount of hardcore/pornographic material, HM's editors found it necessary to censor the magazine reprints for mass US /UK consumption (although not the subsequent album collections, which are not sold via newsstands). Sometimes whole sections of several pages in length have been excised. More commonly, as in the example shown here, superfluous speech balloons have been added to hide the unacceptably hardcore.



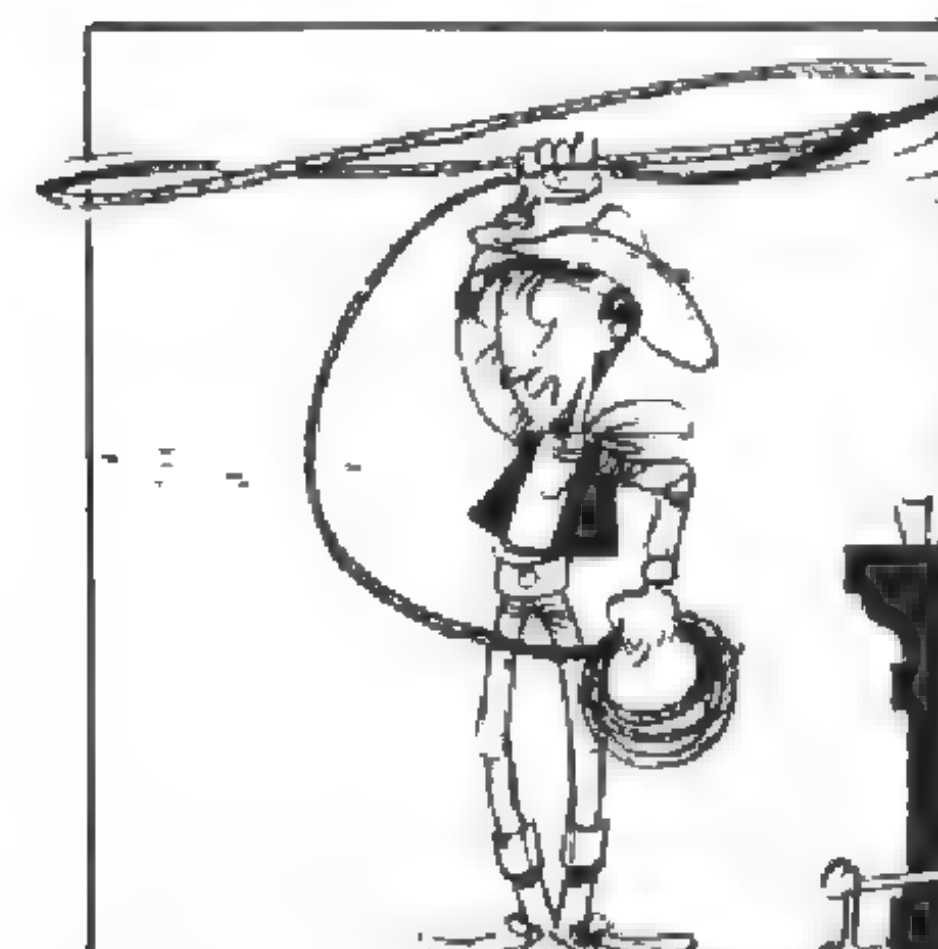
SERPIERI

Another Italian artist, Paulo Eleuteri Serpieri started in comics drawing lavish though restrained Westerns, but it is the science fiction series **Morbus Gravis**, launched in 1985, that brought him international fame. Essentially a story about the exploration of a insane mentality cast in the form of a decaying, planet-sized spacecraft, the series is now more commonly known as **Druuna**, the name of the lead female character. Serpieri progressively transformed a SF series with sex into a hardcore/pornographic comic with an SF setting – he has also published several volumes of drawings and paintings depicting Druuna in all manner of sexual situations.



LIBERATORE

Italian artist Tanino Liberatore has had a great deal of material reprinted in **Heavy Metal**, where it has met with little, if any, censorship. But in the early 1980s the Eclipse anthology title **Twisted Tales** reprinted one of his strips and toned it down. At that time Eclipse was one of only a few new companies distributing via the mainstream but not with Comics Code approval: **Twisted Tales** is still listed in the Overstreet Price Guide today as "containing nudity and violence", but it clearly applied the European practice of self-censorship.



TARZAN

Finally, here is a classic example of the French censor at work during the 1940s. In some ways this may be the most extreme example of censorship on display here. Even the American Comics Code might have been hard put to find anything objectionable in the original panel from Burne Hogarth's Tarzan. However, the reasoning is the same as that applied in Britain in the case of Garth. Prior to the establishment of adult BD in the 1960s, comics were viewed in France as being children's material, so French reprints of American newspaper strips were routinely censored in this way. The increased degree of severity merely reflects a sterner attitude in the 1940s than in the 1980s.



LUCKY LUKE

Lucky Luke is one of the world's bestselling comics series, each story being originally serialised in the children's weekly comic **Spirou** and then collected into albums which are syndicated in many countries. In the late 1960s Morris, the series' Belgian creator, drew this brief, humorous commentary on the self-censorship of sex and violence he applied in producing the strip. The captions read "He forgot that we aren't in **Spirou** here" and "If you think a lasso is only for catching cattle..."



GARTH

The last regular assignment of classic British comics artist Frank Bellamy was the *Daily Mirror* newspaper strip **Garth**. Started in 1943 by artist Steve Dowling, **Garth** had always taken advantage of the comparative freedom to show nudity enjoyed by British newspaper strips following the success of Norman Pett's **Jane**. Half-naked beauties were as much a part of its appeal as were the exploits of the muscular hero, and Bellamy's early 1970s stint on the series certainly didn't break with that tradition.

However, in 1974 six of Bellamy and writer Jim Edgar's stories were compiled and reprinted by Fleetway in a **Garth** annual. Whose bright idea this was is unknown: British comics annuals are traditionally bought by adults as Christmas gifts for young relatives, and so a Fleetway editor must have decided that the material needed toning down for the kiddies. Finding as many as six stories which could be easily censored must have proved difficult: in the event one of the stories used had as much as 20% of its content cut outright and, despite some crude re-lettering, ended up making very little sense!

Reproduced here are a couple of censored panels from two other stories, *The Cloud of Balthus* and *The Women of Galba*, in both the original and annual reprint forms. One has been discreetly retouched, the other hasn't! Both show what the British censor considered to be inappropriate viewing for young readers...



borderline

THE COMICS MAGAZINE

SOME THINGS CHANGE...



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columns,
articles and
interviews...

ISSUES

Season of goodwill to all men? Not a bit of it, as Carol Close names her US Comicbook Cretins of the Year...

APART from me, who has *really* pissed you off this year? Whose every comics-related utterance has had you grinding your teeth, punching a wall and turning the air seven shades of blue? Is it a columnist? A creator? Some sex starved über-gimp on a message board somewhere? Come on, name names and vent that spleen.

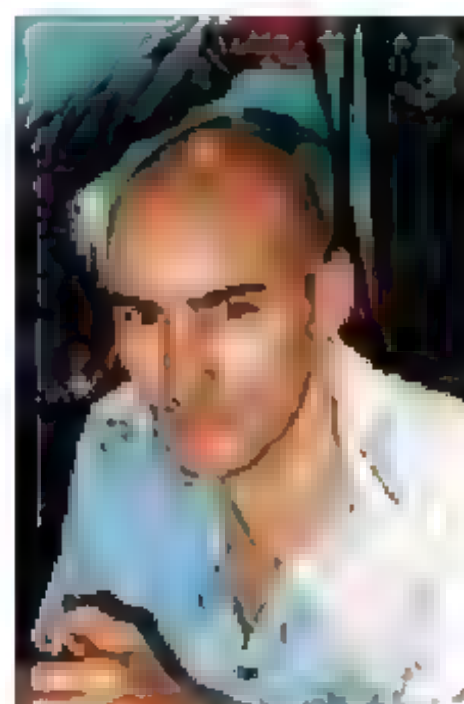
Unsurprisingly, I have my own list. It runs to about 16 sides of narrow-lined A4 and features the words KILL, KILL, KILL in two-inch high red biro as a recurring motif. However, for the purposes of a paltry 800-word column like this one I've whittled it down to just a few choice names. Welcome, then, to Carol Close's Comicbook Cretin(s) 2002, in which I name the person or persons who have most "harshed my mellow" in the last 12 months. And the nominations are...



BRIAN K. VAUGHN
As writer of **Y: The Last Man**, Vaughn served up a foul-smelling smorgasbord of lazy misogyny

(man-hating amazons with one breast!), pro-life bunkum and sub-Zionist politics. All in all, **Y** was far too redolent of mainstream comics' lurch to the right post-September 11, a state of affairs also witnessed in Kevin Smith's shameful caricaturing of Muslim terrorists in his wretched **Daredevil v Bullseye** mini-series. As far as Vaughn went it was a pity, as the title he penned for Marvel - **The Hood** - was not only rather good, but was mercifully free of any such reactionary posturing.

GRANT MORRISON



The industry's most overrated writer flounced about in a silly white suit at the summer's big UK comics convention (only 15 years after Alan Moore had done exactly the same, so zero points for originality as usual) and made a spectacular ass of himself in an interview published on the Sequential Tart website, in which he used the latest pretentious industry buzz word - "meme" - about three thousand frigging

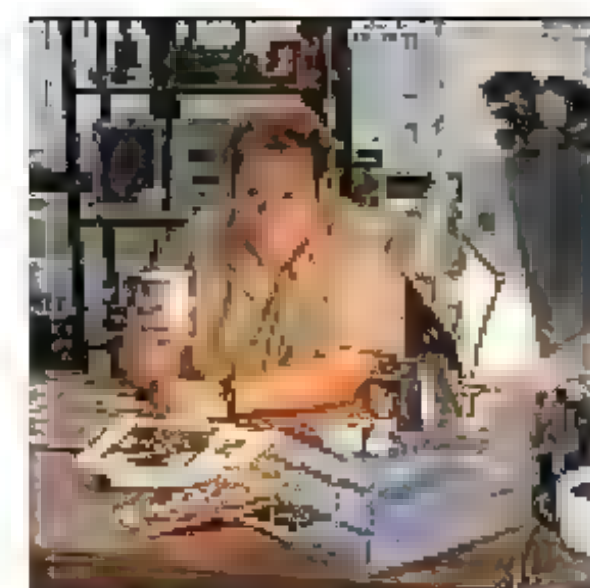
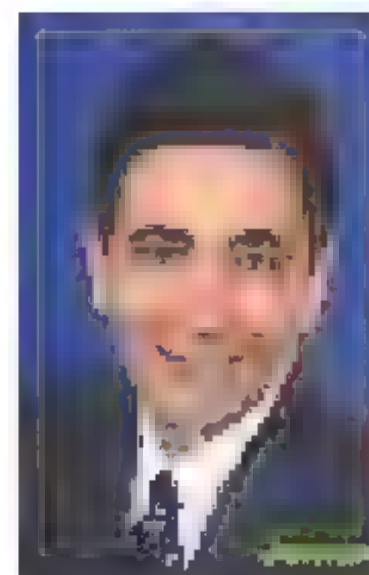
times and dismissed the UK's thriving small press scene as "vanity publishing". No, Grant, "vanity publishing" is chucking together a load of self-indulgent detritus like **The Filth** then trying to get Vertigo to leave your name off it in a desperate bid to appear "cool".

MIKE MILLER

I'd never even heard of this joker until a couple of weeks ago when Rich Johnston's *Lying In The Gutters* column over at CBR revealed that Miller - a former penciller on **JLA** - had claimed he'd been dumped by DC for professing, on the company's message boards, a belief that homosexuality was wrong. Bearing in mind DC's perceived attitude to the "love that dare not speak its name" (you all remember the Apollo and Midnighter saga, right?), such black-balling seems highly unlikely, suggesting that not only is born again Bible basher Miller a homophobe but he's a paranoid and self-pitying one at that.

BILL JEMAS & JOE QUESADA

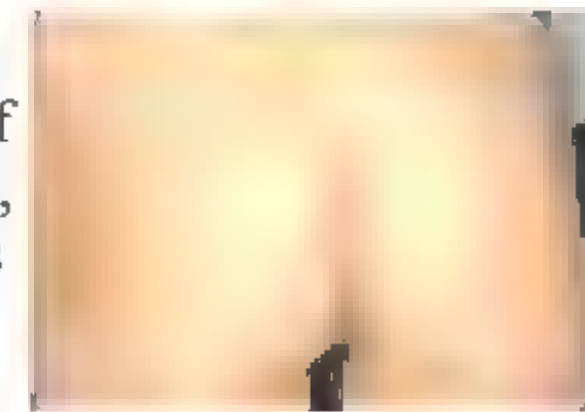
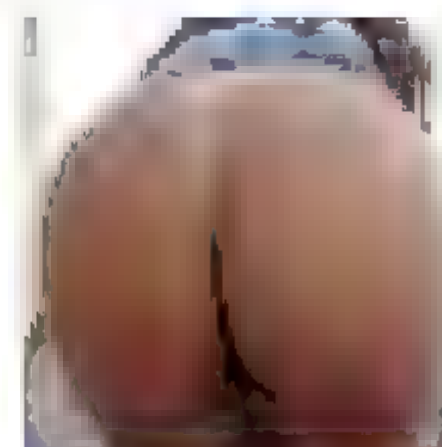
OK, so Marvel's in a better place creatively and financially than it has been for years but like members of some irksome rock'n'roll band desperate to make a name for themselves, Jemas and Quesada have spent too much of 2002 courting controversy. If the staged online spat with writer Peter David and the tireless sniping at



Paul Levitz and DC weren't enough to condemn them, then the unpleasant and misogynistic comments about the Sequential Tart team ("Sequential Sluts") definitely were. I'm prepared to give Marvel's very own Mötley Crüe the benefit of the doubt regarding the Rawhide Kid at this stage, but can't quite shake the feeling they've made the character gay not because they're interested in confronting taboos or exploring sexuality but because it means that CNN and *The New York Times* might just take an interest in their comicbooks for once. Only time will tell.

IAN UNGSTAD

The talent-free gossip columnist, who took over Rich Johnston's *All The Rage* at www.silverbulletcomicbooks.com, was only handicapped by one thing - he would have struggled to find gossip even if someone had stapled a great load of it to his forehead and said "Look, Ian, there's a pile of gossip stapled to your forehead!" In an act of desperation, the hapless oaf attempted



to deflect the reader's attention from the fact that his column was barer than Mrs Hubbard's cupboard by featuring lurid pornographic images in it, which might have been fun for readers of Avatar titles, but was rather less so for the rest of us. Unsurprisingly, the unsubtle, uninspiring, unfit for consumption Ungstad was soon unceremoniously dropped, and hasn't been heard from since.

BLOODY TRANSFORMERS

Yeah, I know they aren't real (if only more of you realised the same thing), but Optimus Prime, Megatron and their mates at



Dreamwave were nevertheless responsible for the year's most irritating trend, i.e. the return to comics of all those crappy, kitsch cartoon characters from the dim and distant past, such as **Thundercats**, **Battle Of The Planets** and **The Micronauts**. The fact that most of the wretched books sold by the truckload, and in some cases even topped the monthly sales charts, should be a matter of great embarrassment to US comics fans everywhere.

AND THE WINNER IS...

Joe Quesada and Bill Jemas for all the reasons mentioned above, but also for inflicting the execrably unfunny **Marville** on us, for reinvigorating Chuck Austen's career and for allowing Ron Zimmerman anywhere near **The Punisher**. Congratulations, gentlemen, on an impressive and well-deserved victory.

ECLECTICISM POR FAVOR

¡REVERSO!



Nº1-3€



Borderline is, as everybody should know by now, an international comics magazine - and that means a magazine about comics from every part of the globe. We have already covered comics from areas as diverse as Brazil and Poland, and this month *Borderline*'s Mike Sivier turns to Spain and a new comic entitled *Reverso*: six strips in various genres, married with articles and even tutorials on how readers can make comics for themselves.

REVERSO may be a departure for Spanish comics. An anthology title, it mixes six strips of varying genres with articles on diverse subjects, short stories and "How to..." articles in a format which used to be familiar in a thousand British weekly comics but hasn't been seen here in Blighty since the 1980s. But the magazine may attract wider international interest - for example, from fans of DC Comics' **Superman**, whose penciller Pasqual Ferry may contribute a cover for the second issue, which is due out in February.

Borderline has been lucky enough to arrange a picture preview of **Reverso**, together with a mini-interview with editor Carlos Correia.

Correia himself has been writing for a *Comics Journal*-style magazine for the past three years - and scripts one of the strips in the first issue. Regarding the format of **Reverso**, he told **Borderline**: "Yes, there is more than one strip, in fact, there are six different strips. They are sci-fi, fantasy, slice of life... We are open to all

kinds of genres."

And the authors are similarly from a multiplicity of backgrounds. "They are from Spain, Andorra, Ecuador, Argentina and the Republica Dominicana," said Correia. "Some of them are new to the medium, but a few of them have already worked in the Spanish and French market. Some have experience in erotic and porn comics. But we are not going to cover those genres. Some have illustrated RPG books."

The role-playing game connection is reinforced by the choice of lead article in the premier edition of **Reverso**. Correia explains: "In our first issue we have a role-playing game-related article, and two short stories - terror and fantasy. We'll try to have an article which is comics or RPG-related, and a short story, in every issue."

And that leaves us with the "tutorials". What does Correia mean by tutorials? What are they about? "We are trying to explain all the steps of making a comicbook," he said. "In this first





issue, we explain everything about writing a plot for a comic-book. [Future] issues will cover the materials needed to draw and ink a comicbook, anatomy, shadows, colouring - everything, in fact."

Seems meaty - although one should point out that, this being a Spanish title, readers have to be able to read Spanish to understand it. This should not be a problem to many, though - after all, it is the most-used language in the world. So what about the strips? That's what we comics fans want to know about - and **Reverso** does seem to have a wide variety, all of which are represented in the

accompanying illustrations.

Leyenda (Legend) is by Jordi Planellas, who can also be found working on projects for the French market. It is a short fantasy tale - covering just two pages - about a legendary leader who stands alone against a horde of invaders.

Stone is by Vicente de los Santos, author of a soon-to-be-published RPG, and Luis Maria Seco, and is described by Correia as "a bounty hunter tale with a surprising ending".

Amley, written by Xavier Cruz and pencilled by Javi Bit - who has broken into the American market and is working right now for a new American publisher, Red Tsunami Press - represents science fiction. It is about a lost king and a war between realms.

Mandragora, which Correia describes as "a strange story about a tattooed girl who is found after she has fainted in the middle of the

Sabe que no puede salir vivo, pero es el Rey, y su deber es retrasarnos todo el tiempo posible para que su gente pueda huir...

...y eso lo conseguirá

desert" is by Carlos Kraneo, who produces monthly strips for webzines. Jordi Planellas, author of *Leyenda*, reappears in tandem with co-author Eduardo Lagos for *Rodarian* - another science fiction story set in a space station. "You can describe it as *Babylon 5* meets *NYPD Blue*," said Correia.

Finally, *Vida* (Life), is by editor Correia himself, working with Luis Maria Seco, author of *Stone*. "It's the slice-of-life story, about a girl who commits suicide and changes her mind too late", he said...

Nelson Castillo, who is currently working for the French market and has two albums due to be published, pencils the cover of the first issue of *Reverso*, reproduced elsewhere in this article.

Reverso costs €3.00. Contact reverso@sentinelstudio.com for details of how to get hold of a copy.



THE CON THAT DID



DreddCon 3 took place at The Brewery, London, England on December 14 2002, and Borderline's Jay Eales was there...

(additional editorialising courtesy of P. Hall & M. Kidson during final editing)

WITH a venue named "The Brewery", there's an obvious question to be asked about the ability of Rebellion, owners of

2000AD, to organise a piss-up in a brewery... *DreddCon 3* proved that, thankfully, yes they could, although the event could only be

considered a qualified success – especially as the attendance was down by 60% on the previous year, arguably because of the incredibly inflated £15.00 entrance fee. It was a gamble that paid off economically for Rebellion, but at what cost morally or for future morale of the fans?

Very much a small-scale affair compared to Kev F. Sutherland's annual Bristol-based comics festivals, DreddCon is a celebration of all things **2000AD**. Sutherland, also organiser of the previous two DreddCons on behalf of Rebellion, acted only in the capacity of panel organiser and compere this year. He reports that "attendance was healthy, if understandably lower than [in] previous years. By my calculation there were half as many people there (paying 15 pounds a ticket) as last year (at 6 pounds a ticket), which is ultimately more profitable for Rebellion and raised no complaints from anyone present." At times, though, it seemed as if the ratio of creators to punters was 50-50...

Rebellion also managed to save a few pennies by dispensing with fripperies such as a programme for attendees, who instead had to rely on a couple of notice boards to find out what was on and where. There were two reasonably sized rooms set aside for panels: unfortunately you could only

reach one of them by travelling through the other one, disturbing whatever was going on in there at the time.

Timekeeping was also a little off, as it would seem is traditional at such events. The first panel, by audio production company Big Finish, got off to a ropey start by commencing over half an hour after it was scheduled, and the sound system provided wasn't up to the task of demonstrating how the Big Finish audio plays are put together. But after several minutes of tinkering and debating whether to switch venues, the panel got into the swing of things.

Over the course of the day, there were signings by folks such as Judge Dredd's creator, John Wagner, and numerous other script and art droids [abbreviation of "androids" and **2000AD**'s humorous term for creators]. Frazer Irving introduced his audience to his "Crazy World", demonstrating among other things how he put together the infamous *Reefer Madness* strip written by Gordon Rennie, from initial concept through to coloured and finished pages. A panel featuring New Droids Si Spurrier, Boo Cook, Rob Williams, Adrian Bamforth, P.J. Holden, Steve Roberts and **2000AD**'s webmaster Wakefield Carter fielded the subject of how they broke into working for **2000AD**.

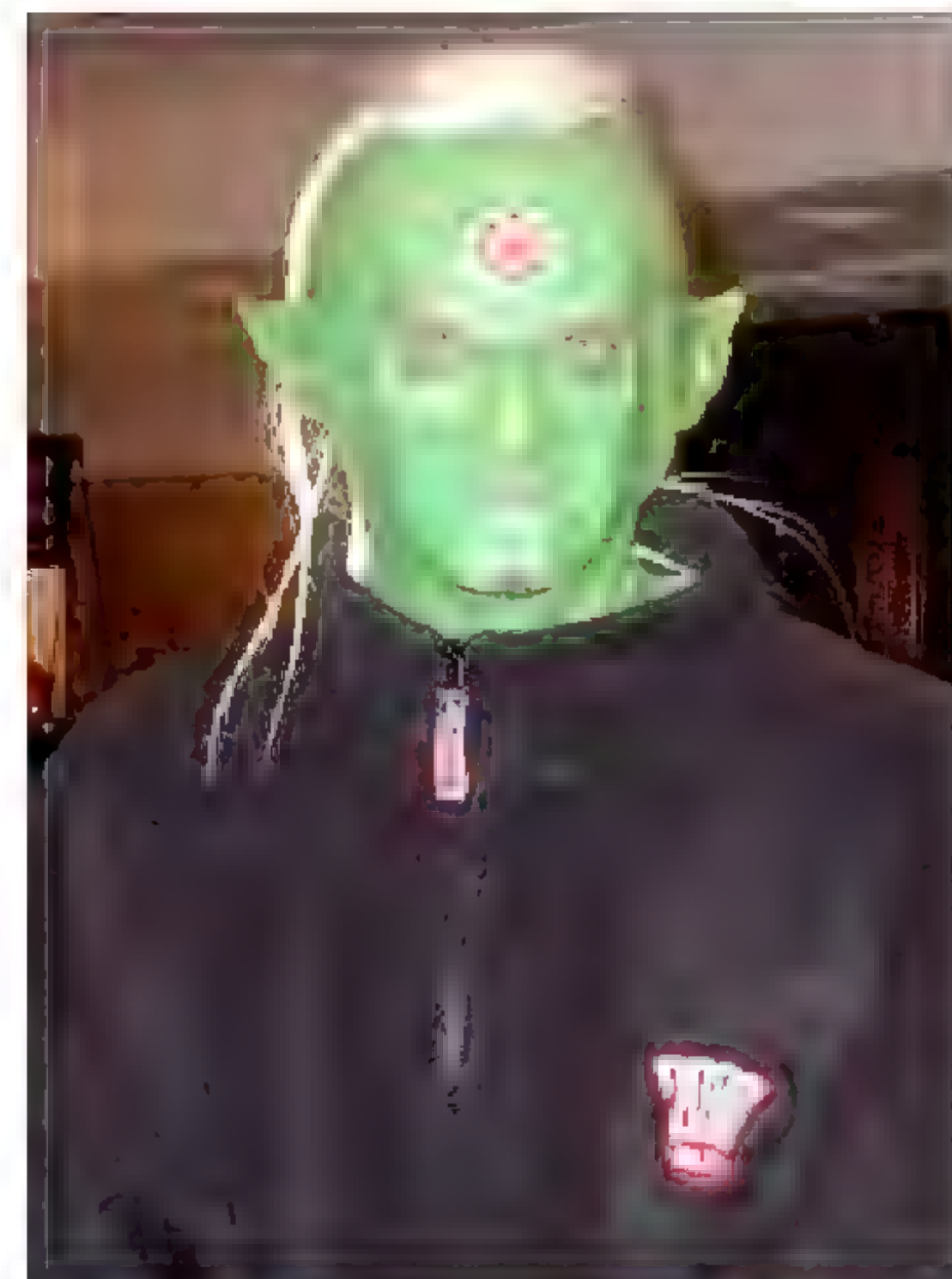
A later panel brought out some of the more established creators, the Old Droids: Frazer Irving, Siku, Andy Diggle, Peter Doherty, Steve Yeowell, Mike Collins, Mike Carey, Simon Fraser and Simon Davis, who all discussed projects they're well known for and their future work, including confirmation that Mike Carey will be writing a new **Firestorm** series for DC Comics. At one

point, it almost seemed as though there was going to be a punch-up between Siku and laid-back Yorkshireman Peter Doherty, over the difference between comics and computer games, but all was in jest.

The panellists waxed lyrical about their favourite **2000AD** strips and favourite artists. Andy Diggle recalled asking the legendary *Dredd* artist Ron Smith – famed more than any other artist for his depiction of Mega City 1, he had moved into more lucrative work – if he'd ever consider doing more comics, to be met with a reply of "Not bloody likely!" When classic artist Ian Kennedy's name was mentioned, several of the panel were enthusiastic about his depiction of the most realistic Spitfires [fighter planes!] in comics.

As with previous DreddCons, there was the Pitch Fest, where attendees were given two minutes each to pitch a story idea to Tharg [**2000AD**'s alien editor] and a panel of writers and artists, in the hope of winning a commission for **2000AD**. Ten brave souls stepped up to the challenge, including 13 year-old Misha Begley, who came fifth. Third equal were Alan Donald [writer of the *All The Rage* rumour column] and Natalie Sandells [artist of **Devilchild**, by **Borderline**'s Andrew Winter]. Second place went to *Sperm Count*, a totally unpublishable (though hilarious) yarn about alien invasions, anal sex and Posh and Becks, by Paul Glasswell. *Yuri Gagarin* – a *Past Imperfect* what-if scenario by Arthur Wyatt [small press writer for **Violent!** and **Zarjaz** among other things] took the crown and, after rewrites, is expected to see print in **2000AD** some time next year.

There was a panel on the difference between American and European comics, but unfortunately a combination of some bizarre panellist choices and the surreal questions from one member of the audience left things a little flat. It seems a bit odd, given the topic, to invite Alan Barnes and Matt Smith (editors of **The Megazine** and **2000AD**, respectively), who have only had experience of UK editorial jobs, to talk about the difference between the UK and



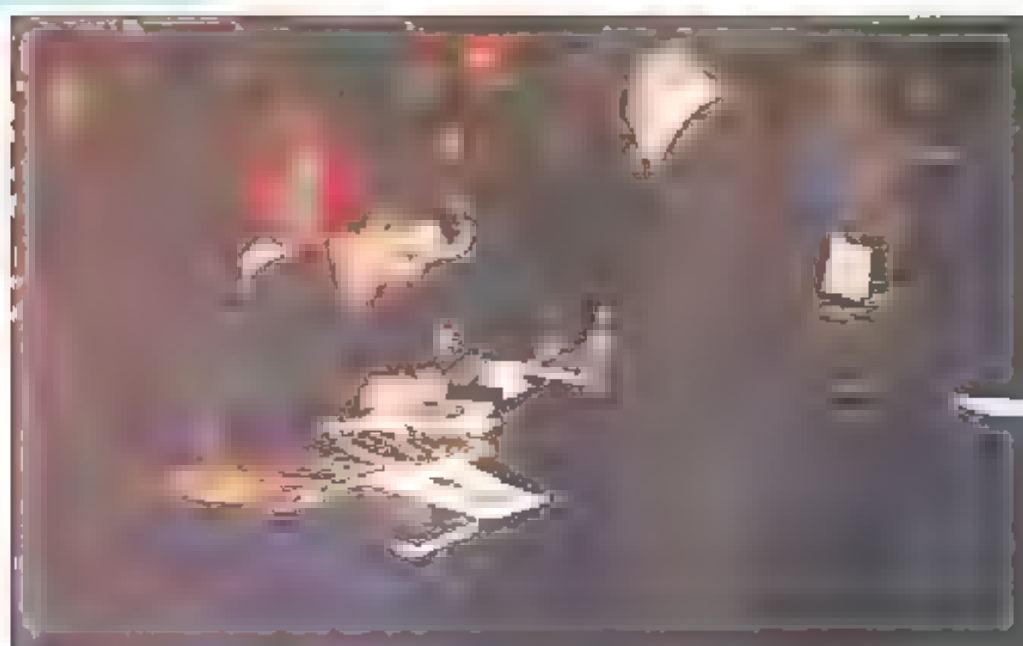
US comics scene, when other guests at the event were far more qualified to talk about the subject. However, that said, the audience were made privy to some frank discussion of subjects like pay discrepancies between companies, royalties, and how close **2000AD** has been to closure on a number of occasions.

One lucky punter (if lucky can be considered the right word) was transformed with make-up and prosthetics into the likeness of Tharg the Mighty, while the audience looked on.

Another letdown of DreddCon, especially in a place called "The Brewery", was the lack of decent refreshments. The venue itself had no bar, just a long trestle table serving tea and coffee for an extortionate £2.50 per cup! They had a veritable "Great Wall of China" of china cups on display, and judging by business, I imagine they didn't have to dismantle much of it, or spend much time washing up afterwards. For drinks of a stronger nature, attendees had to cross the road to a pub, part of the Pizza in the Pub chain, which was also to



Above: **Borderline** buddy Mike Collins with Ministry of Space's Chris Weston. Opposite: someone dons the make-up and costume of Tharg, the mythical **2000AD** editor...



play host to the after-show party. The chain name was apt, as the only food that you could buy was of the pizza variety or, if you were feeling particularly racy, lasagne instead. Admittedly, the fare was tasty, but very limited, especially after the pub ran out of salad and some sizes of pizza quite early on. Luckily, though, given the complaints of other comics-based conventions past, they didn't run out of beer.

Given that ticket prices for the event included a £10 surcharge for any non-guests who wanted to attend the after-show party - in what was basically just a pub that

appeared to be open to all-comers - and that there didn't seem to be anybody manning the doors to check for badges, I'm surprised not to have heard any complaints from people who paid up for the privilege. Perhaps those few non-invitees in the pub had slipped in without

paying, because everybody certainly seemed to be having a good time.

DreddCon 3 missed some of the atmosphere of last year's Nottingham-based DreddCon 2 [see *Borderline* #4] but the intimacy of the event meant that readers and creators got to mingle freely and geek about their shared passion for **2000AD**, and what's wrong with that?

Nothing really, except that these people are already the only people who pay the creators' wages. Surely the publisher should be giving something back rather than expecting more?



At the Dreddcon Vaults with Frazer Irving grinning at the front... D'IIsraeli signs up top!

THE INTERNET KILLED THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY 4

Ande Morgensen's last word on why comics' future is brighter than you might think...

THE Internet is indeed killing the entertainment industry - and meanwhile, comics remain expensive and the major perpetrators expect us to pay through the nose for a product produced by creators with little or no *real* talent.

There is no *real* difference between Grant Morrison and, say, Chuck Dixon. Both understand how to use the English language. Both are unlikely to be anything else anywhere else - this is as far as their 15 minutes of fame is taking them. The question "why aren't we accomplished comicbook writers?" has become something of a point of discussion between my one comics reading friend and myself - after all, both of us have more creative imaginations than half the bozos that write the comics either of us read. And in a weird way that's the key to saving comics...

Comics publishing could be such a different proposition than it is at the moment if only someone was *really* brave. DC is in a position to be *really* brave. But it just chooses to stay in the background, as the big Daddy overlooking the rest of the playing field. In fact DC is a bit like the Christian man's God, sitting in quiet judgement, never interfering unless a whim takes its fancy. DC holds the key to promoting comics into the same social and economic status in the USA and the UK as

they hold anywhere else in the world. Yet for some strange reason it chooses not to. Its masters - a supposedly foresighted company displaying enormous naivety - hold the key, yet they allow literally everyone else in the market to call the shots.

This is it, people, hold onto your hats, this is where I give you the answers to all your problems.

The comicbook is dead. It can never be returned to the mass market retail shelf again, because it is too expensive and offers less

value for money than any alternative. The growth industry in entertainment is computer games and games consoles - a place where *you* can be the superhero. If you have an imagination... even better! Remember when I told you why Marvel was doing a good thing with its dot comics? I didn't really explain myself, did I? Well, showing comics over the Internet is a great idea - it does all the important things, pushes all the correct buttons and sends out the right signals. I think you'll find that there is a large percentage of the population who will read comics on the web but would still eventually want a *physical* copy - this is what Marvel, DC, Image, Dark Horse, et al. are hoping for. It doesn't matter how good

Borderline might be, it isn't *real* - but print it out and it suddenly becomes a magazine with a value.

Comics also don't benefit from films or TV shows any more. There was hardly a noticeable rise in **X-Men** readers after that hit the cinemas. Yet comics will continue to provide a wealthy source of inspiration for filmmakers for years to come. This is something that needs to be nurtured continually. If the success of recent superhero films is to be productive, then *everyone* has to realise that comics is a medium and not a genre.

Comics is also an endearing



Above and right: The X-Men movie - the success of the film hid the fact that comics sales continued to drop.



medium - all of us have enjoyed them at some point or other and in some form. Whether it's a **Superman** comic or a cartoon in a newspaper or a slice of life pamphlet, we've all read and enjoyed something, so comics have a place in our hearts and they don't necessarily have to lose that place either. The secret of keeping people attracted is to offer them something in the 21st century that is going to appeal to them in a hostile and largely disinterested market. The first thing the major publishers can do is cut away a lot of the talentless hacks. Employ writers and artists that can write and draw and turn the two in inside the allotted period of time. Return the industry to a time when the customer was the king, and it was vital that publishers made sure all their writers and the artists (and the peripheral staff) fulfilled their commitments on a regular basis. The truth is that the US comicbook industry, for all of its faults, can attract writers and artists from all over the world. The reason isn't

because the country is a bastion of brilliant comics, it's because we have comics publishers that are so stupid they pay page rates that attract artists to them like shit attracts flies.

There are writers and artists out there that have ability. That ability can be turned into something to benefit all. The above two things won't marry because anyone out there with an iota of talent *isn't* trying to break into comics, while those people that are trying to break into comics mostly have the same goal that has been reached by the top ranking creators. They all expect to become millionaires, or at least have enough money to never worry about working hard ever again. Jack Kirby must be turning in his grave - but these new aspirants *deserve* to believe that that is what should befall them, because the industry has ensured that that is what has befallen their predecessors. Things have to change. Or there won't be anything much left for anyone pretty soon.

The major publishers will never talk to each other seriously, but they might follow each other's lead if something is seen to work. How, though, do you tell the people who make the money in your industry that they have been devalued, that they are now no longer worth as much as they were only yesterday? Today's superstars may believe they can create the next generation of hero books, but the fact is that readers stay with brands. They *like* creators and will follow a creator for so long, but in the end they normally stick with the monkey and not the organ grinder. Yet to make more people stick with comics, you need to have intelligent creators, with stories

that have a universal appeal. The trend in recent years is for story arcs to tell a single story so that these can be collected together in book format. Trade paperbacks work and make marginal comics series workable projects. But the problem is that they are expensive and do nothing to attract the juvenile demographic that is likely to grow up and become an avid comics reader.

So what should the industry do? Only employ creators who have had both critical *and* commercial success. Thank the others and tell them that maybe one day they might get invited back into the fold, but if they want to pursue a career in comics then they should go the self-publishing route. Make comics a medium for only the best, and let those who aren't working for the major companies do their own stuff in a bigger self-publishing arena.

Publishers should market new

products aggressively - books are big again, why can't comics be? They are only types of book, after all. Publishers need to advertise these 'little books' in other areas of the entertainment industry. They need to take advantage of the lowest television advertising rates ever; rates that are still falling. They need to provide complete retailer support. They need to treat the people selling their product the same way the book trade treats its sellers.

The way forward is with cheaper graphic novels. Cheaper collections, except they're no longer collections of comics, just chaptered parts. Dispense with most pamphlet comics and produce 140-page+ books of the popular characters. Don't try to "snow" the public with lies about print costs: if you at Marvel, DC, Image et al. are complaining about print prices then you need to look abroad to the places that produce your books for other markets. An issue of **Batman**

that sells an inordinately greater amount in Mexico than it does in the US only costs a fraction of the US price. How is that achieved?

The publishers complain about print costs: they probably aren't really that high (and if they are they should switch to cheaper printing, because cheaper comics will encourage new readers more than technological paper breakthroughs) but they can say they are thus forcing the price up and remaining on a relatively even keel regarding profit margins - the long term solution to the law of diminishing returns. Except there is no solution, and something has been glaringly obvious for years - comics can be cheap again, but the publishers are frightened that profits would drop by up to 75% immediately and there's no guarantee they can win back a big enough audience fast enough to warrant taking that plunge.

This is where AOL/Time Warner, DC's folks, come in. There is enough money in that company to do it. Make comics 95 cents and back up the decision with even more monetary outlay. Continue to finance something for an indefinite period of time until it's working again. Comics are on sale in supermarkets and newsstands again. It's cheap, it's inspirational and your retailer wants to stock them rather than some other crap to rot kids' brains.

But that won't happen. By the end of this decade there will probably be a marked rise in small publishers. By the end of the 2020s probably the only thing that will be left of the industry, as we know it, will be versions of the biggest, most famous icons.

And it's all the Internet's fault.



TRANSATLANTIC MEDITATIONS

Arnold T. Blumberg – *Borderline's* US correspondent – takes comics to college...

LAST time, I talked about the general reaction I encounter in social situations when I reveal that I teach a course in comic book literature. After receiving encouragement from some intrigued readers - to say nothing of my editor as well - who wanted to know more about the course and how it all came to pass, and since I'm working on developing a textbook based on that very course, I'll be devoting the next few columns to just that topic.

I've remained an active member of my undergraduate alma mater's alumni community, serving as co-founder and President of our English Alumni Society for several years now. Around the same time that we established the Society, I was chatting with the English department chair at a university function when he suggested I might

want to try my hand at teaching. The notion of returning to the college where I spent some wonderful years and seeing it from the other side of the desk was too exciting an opportunity to pass up. There was, however, one problem - I didn't feel confident enough to tackle one of the core "survey" courses in, say, early American literature or Victorian novels. But there was a form of literature I did know intimately, and imagine my surprise when I was met with this reply: "OK. Teach a course in that then."

Wow. Carte blanche not only to teach a course in comics but to build it from scratch. Where do I begin? There was actually very little trepidation about the process, as I had composed the reading list for a possible comic course in my head long before that fateful day. There are a number of other comic-based college courses across the country, but I studiously avoided looking up any of their syllabi online until I had written my own. After the fact, I discovered that my line of thinking meshed quite well with the others, although many of them tend to focus on comics as an art subject rather than a literary one.

The course would need an introductory textbook of sorts, something to underscore the value of the medium and instruct newcomers - most of my students, strangely enough, would be complete strangers to comics, as

today's American youth spends most of their time with electronic and video-based entertainment - in the language of comics. It would have to establish a common ground for future discussion and provide us with the vocabulary we would need to deconstruct and analyze the readings for the rest of the semester. There was only one choice for me - Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. While it was an excellent selection for a foundational text, I intended that it should not be taken at face value. McCloud makes a few murky assertions, as he himself admits, so I expected we would not only rely on McCloud but dare to question him as well.

Having chosen the textbook, it was time to compose a reading

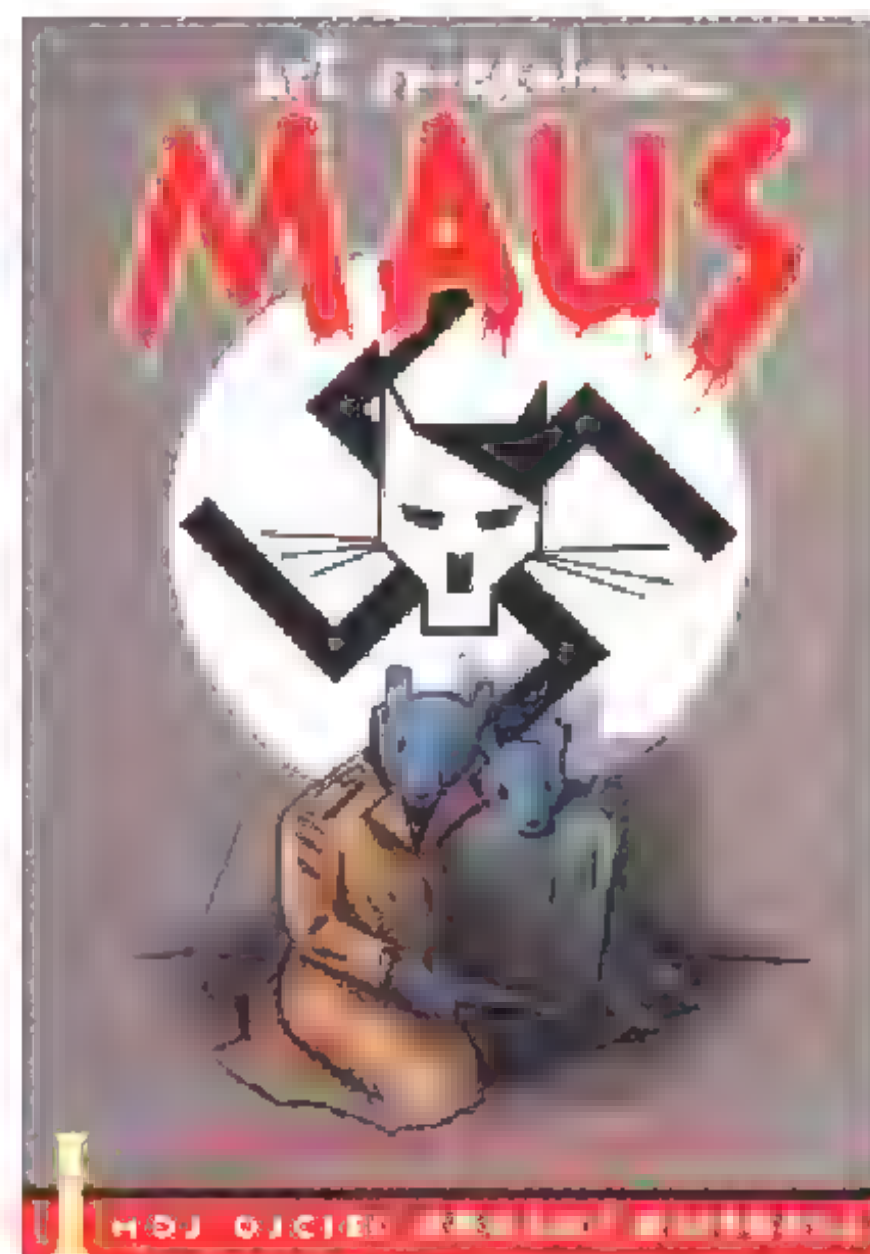
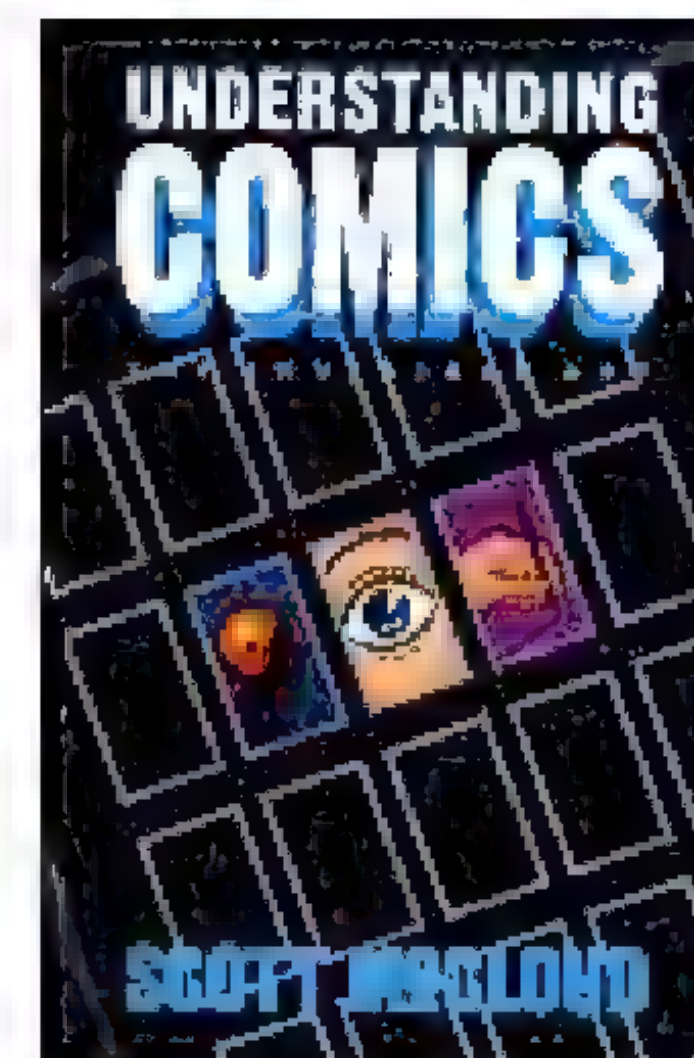
list, but therein lay another logistical problem. It isn't easy to order 50 copies of dozens of individual comic books for a college classroom; I assumed that I would be spending a lot of time at the copy machine, and I was right. But although I would provide a lot of copied comic book stories, we would still need some actual books for the course, and thankfully there were plenty of graphic novels and trade paperbacks to choose from. In fact, some of the best examples of true comic book "literature" were in those formats anyway.

The first and most obvious choice was Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. If I didn't already think it was one of the finest literary achievements in comic book history, that Pulitzer Prize would have convinced me to include it in the course. But if Spiegelman told a very human story set against the backdrop of history, what of a comic that tried to capture history itself? Rick Geary's *Fatal Bullet*, a slim but amusingly tongue-in-cheek graphic novel about the assassination of President Garfield, was just the thing.

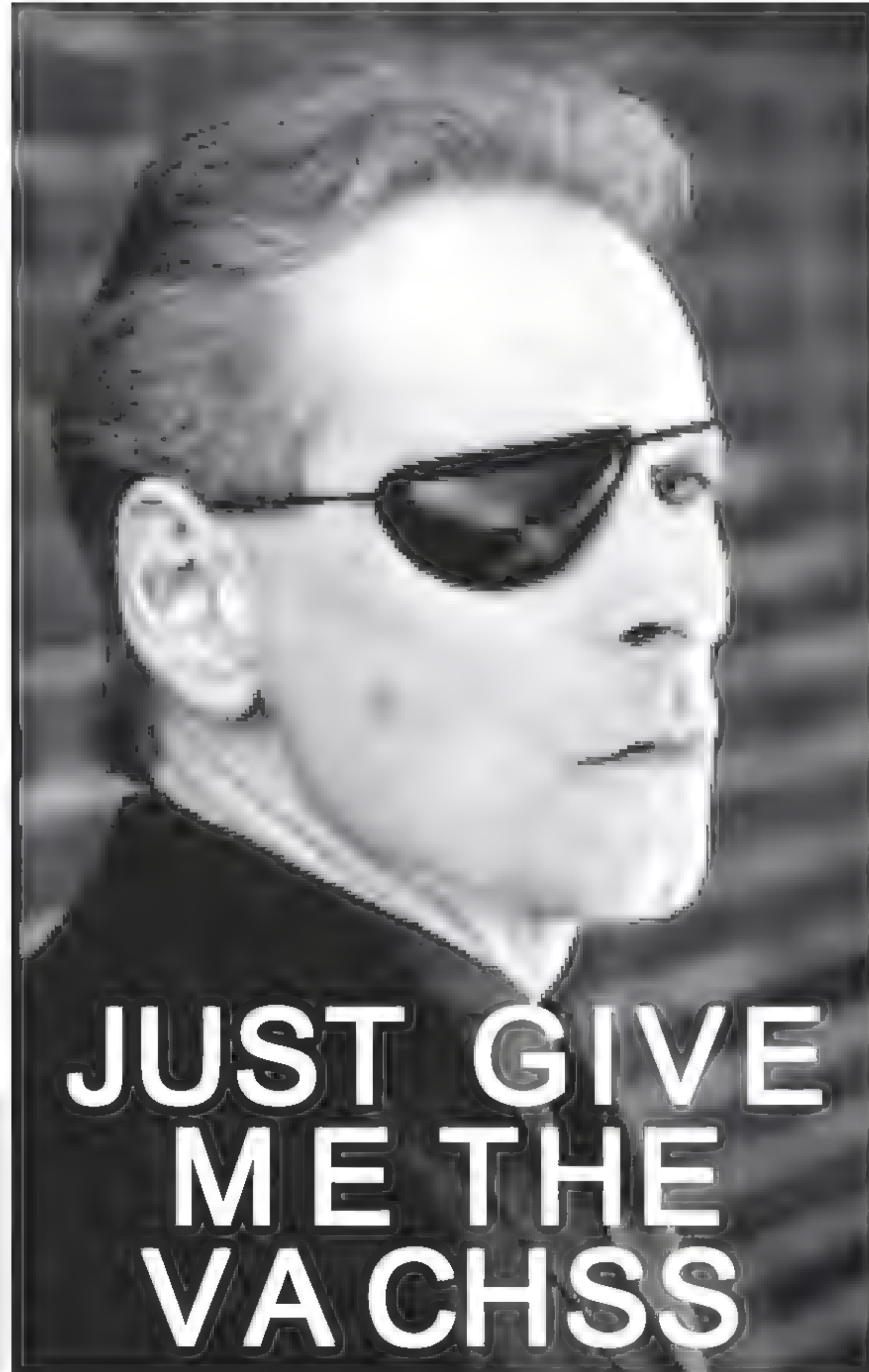
I wanted to minimize the intrusion of superheroes into the course; this was about the power of the medium, not about the power to climb walls or run at super-speed. But I also specifically framed the course as a study of *American* comics - thus saving myself the headache of

teaching other cultural approaches to comics about which I was woefully ill-informed - so superheroes had to rear their four-color heads eventually. Simultaneously the strongest representation of that genre as well as a stunning deconstruction of it, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* would be my primary super-selection. Less a superhero epic and more a symbolic treatise on human nature, this is one of the most astonishing comic book stories ever created. It has an almost frightening level of complexity, and it may very well be the only full-fledged, functional hypertext in print. Trust me - I'll explain later.

Next time, we'll take a look at the rest of the readings for the course, including *Strangers in Paradise*, *Jimmy Corrigan*, *Pedro and Me*, and a host of others, and I'll explain how I tried to make all of them fit into a survey of the medium that is partly chronological and partly thematic. I'll see you in a 7 weeks... and I'll be taking attendance!



Borderline's Jay Eales recently spoke with the closest thing the real world has to Matt Murdock, author and lawyer Andrew Vachss."



THE comics medium is but the tip of a very large iceberg for writer Andrew Vachss. Comics readers may know him for his Dark Horse work: **Hard Looks**, the crime anthology series that adapted many of his short stories; **Underground**, based on a concept by Vachss; **Cross**, a series based around one of Vachss' continuing characters; **Predator: Race War**, a miniseries pitting Cross against the movie monster, and **Another Chance To Get It Right** – "a childrens book for adults", a collection of stories, poetry and fabulous illustrations by the likes of Geof Darrow, championed by no less than Oprah Winfrey on its release [*is that a good thing?* – *Production Ed.*]. You may also know of his DC work: **Batman: The Ultimate Evil**, a novel and tie-in comics adaptation.

As a prose novelist, Vachss has written no less than 18 novels and 2 short story collections since 1985, published in 25 countries. In 2000 he received the Raymond Chandler Award for his body of work. And that's before we even get to his day job!

Andrew Vachss is an attorney and consultant, with a practice operating out of New York, dealing exclusively in child and youth cases (abuse/neglect, delinquency, custody/visitation, related tort litigation); the novels are merely a way of reaching out to a bigger jury than any courtroom. His career has seen him move from volunteering for relief agencies trying to get food into the warzones of Biafra to running a maximum security prison for violent youths in Massachusetts, and *then* going on to put himself through law school: the word "driven" could have been coined just for Vachss. For a time, he worked as a lawyer by day and cab driver by night. As a caseworker for the New York City Department of Welfare, Vachss saw such horrors - like a baby with venereal disease - that he dedicated his life to doing everything in his power to fight against it. Not so much from any particular

love of children (Vachss is happily married without children), but more from a hatred of abusers, he'll use any weapon in his arsenal to further his



cause. A major figure in the Don't! Buy! Thai! Campaign, designed to force the government of Thailand to take action against the paedophile haven that their country had become, he is also a mover behind the CARE Act, a piece of legislation intended to close a horrific loophole in US law which means that a criminal can expect a longer jail sentence for possession of a pocketful of cocaine than they would for incest. At present, most states of America draw a distinction between the sexual abuse or rape of a child and the same crime perpetrated by a blood relative. The term Vachss coined to describe this inequality is "grow your own victim"...

Just turned 60, with an eyepatch resulting from an assault with a chain when he was a boy, Vachss cuts a severe figure. Never one for small talk, he only grants interviews on his own terms, and speaks just as he writes. What Vachss has to say isn't comfortable, but then, it isn't intended to be.

Borderline is grateful to him and to Lou Bank of Ten Angry Pitbulls for agreeing to an email interview just as Dark Horse are about to release new enhanced editions of **Hard Looks** and **Another Chance To Get It Right**, with additional material and covers by Geof Darrow.



Borderline: You brought your writing to the comics medium for much the same reason as your move into prose, I'd imagine: to spread your message to as many people as possible, by whatever means at hand. But how did the opportunity

present itself?

Andrew Vachss: I believe it was Mike Richardson's idea to adapt my already-existing material (the short stories) into the comics medium - it never would have occurred to me. But, once I was approached, it took

me about five seconds to realize the potential value. And that potential is proven out at every book signing I do, where there are always several people who tell me they came to my novels through the comicbooks.

BL: How successful would you say your forays into comics have been? *Hard Looks* and *Another Chance To Get It Right* are into multiple print editions, but *Underground* disappeared very quickly, and I understand the experience you had with the *Cross* comic was not all that you'd hoped for. Could you give us your views on these projects, given hindsight?

AV: My views, in hindsight? The experiences divide into two sectors, 180 degrees apart. *Hard Looks* gave me an opportunity to "see" my material as I never had before. The adaptations were, in effect, shooting scripts for the artists.

So I not only found an increased opportunity for my work to do *its* work, but learned a lot in the process. *Another Chance* exceeded my wildest expectations, reaching an audience way outside my hardcore (in both senses of the term) fan base, and busting up a few stereotypes in the process. And now for the other side. The *Underground* comics series was not my work. It was my concept, left to others to execute. In my opinion, its death was deserved. And *Cross*? Comics is a visual medium. Putting Geof Darrow covers on that interior "art" was like using a Rembrandt to wrap dead fish.

BL: What you would do differently if you were starting them now?

AV: With *Hard Looks* and *Another Chance*, you can see exactly what I would have done by looking at the forthcoming new versions of each. It

was Mike's vision to expand *Hard Looks* (we expect further volumes, so that all the prior work can be collected in trade paperback), and I have been working on the new material for *Another Chance* with my brother Geof for years. I would also have added Frank Caruso's brilliant interpretation of my "Behavior is the Truth" haiku, had it been available at the time. *Underground*? All I can say is, never again. Not that way. Had I known how the "shared world" thing was going to play out, I would have aborted the project.

I believe the *Underground* series, as collected (in prose) at http://www.vachss.com/av_books/bornbad.html and http://www.vachss.com/av_books/everybodypays.html would make a perfect graphic novel. Here is an example - http://www.vachss.com/av_books/comics/bums.html, *Underground* graphic novels that were published in Finnish, and never appeared in the US. When it comes to *Cross*, there is still a lot of material yet to be adapted. And what I would do next time is simple and straightforward: I would change the artist, change the editor, and supervise the project myself.

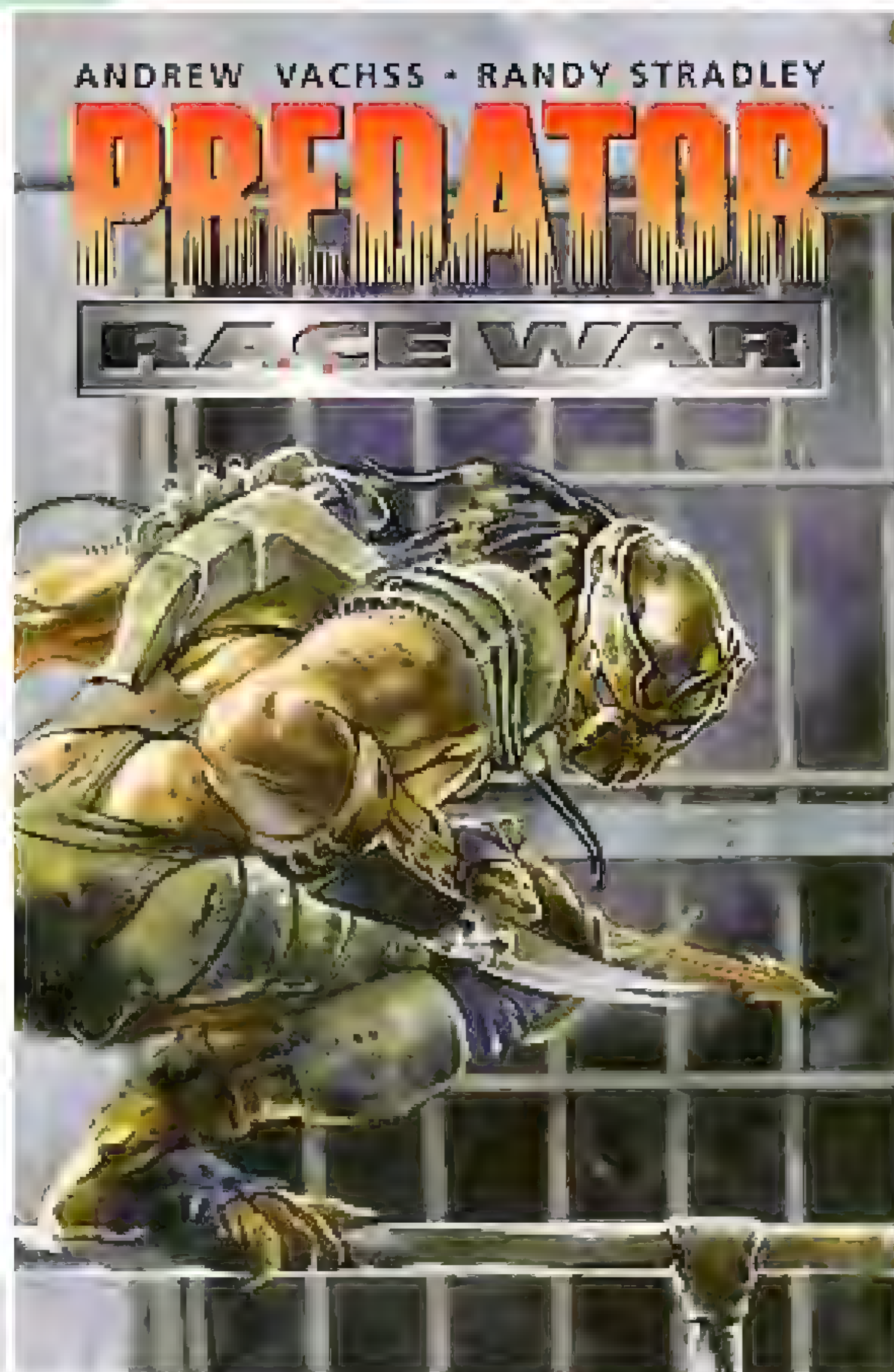
BL: Would you say that your comics work has managed to reach a lot of people who were previously unaware



of your prose work? Has there been a lot of crossover between the two audiences, do you think?

AV: Based on conversations and correspondence with fans, the comics worked beautifully to introduce folks to my prose work, especially as some of them, subsequently, enlisted for the duration. I have had considerable mail from comics fans asking when I am going to return to the medium, or for the continuation of a particular series, or new episodes featuring a particular character... something we may get to do with *Half-Breed*. I also have had people write and say they believe a particular book - *Shella*, http://www.vachss.com/av_novels/shella.html, is the one most





frequently mentioned – would make a great comic, and even suggest specific artists.

And it works [in] the other direction, too. I've heard from readers that they picked up *Hard Looks* in a

bookstore expecting it to be prose – something especially likely to happen again, now that we have dual covers for the new *Hard Looks* – and were surprised, both that it was comics and that they *liked* the comics

medium. From there they went on to other comics, and not just mine. If your goal is to spread the word – and my agenda is no mystery to anyone – cross-pollination is a major technique. When someone asks me, “Why do you write comics?” I tell them, for the same reason I write editorials, essays, and articles; the same reason I give speeches; the same reason I appear on TV programs, and give interviews. Same message; different forum. There is no universal forum, so the more outreach we can do, the better the chance of forming coalitions.

BL: *I understand that the Don't! Buy! Thai! campaign you were a major instigator of, and which was promoted heavily by Dark Horse during the publishing of *Hard Looks* and *Underground*, has been discontinued, at least by yourself, after the Thai economy crashed, and the laws were tightened. Do you consider the campaign a success?*

AV: I could write a book about that. Here is our official position on the Don't! Buy! Thai! campaign – www.vachss.com/mission/dbt_update.html.

BL: *On the website, there is a section devoted to your recommended creators, like Tim Bradstreet, Geof Darrow and Alan Grant. Do you have any time to keep up with any comics these days, given your workload?*

AV: Most of my reading is non-fiction, a necessity in a profession that is in a constant state of flux. But I would find time to read *anything* by Geof Darrow (for my money, the absolute, undisputed champ) and Alan Grant (who, I believe, is the finest writer working in the medium – and the one with the most to say).

BL: *Do you have any current favourites?*

AV: Besides anything by Geof or Alan, I especially like the writing of Cuckoo – <http://www.vachss.com/media/comics/cuckoo.html> – by Madison Clell, and the art of Tim Truman and Kyle Hotz.

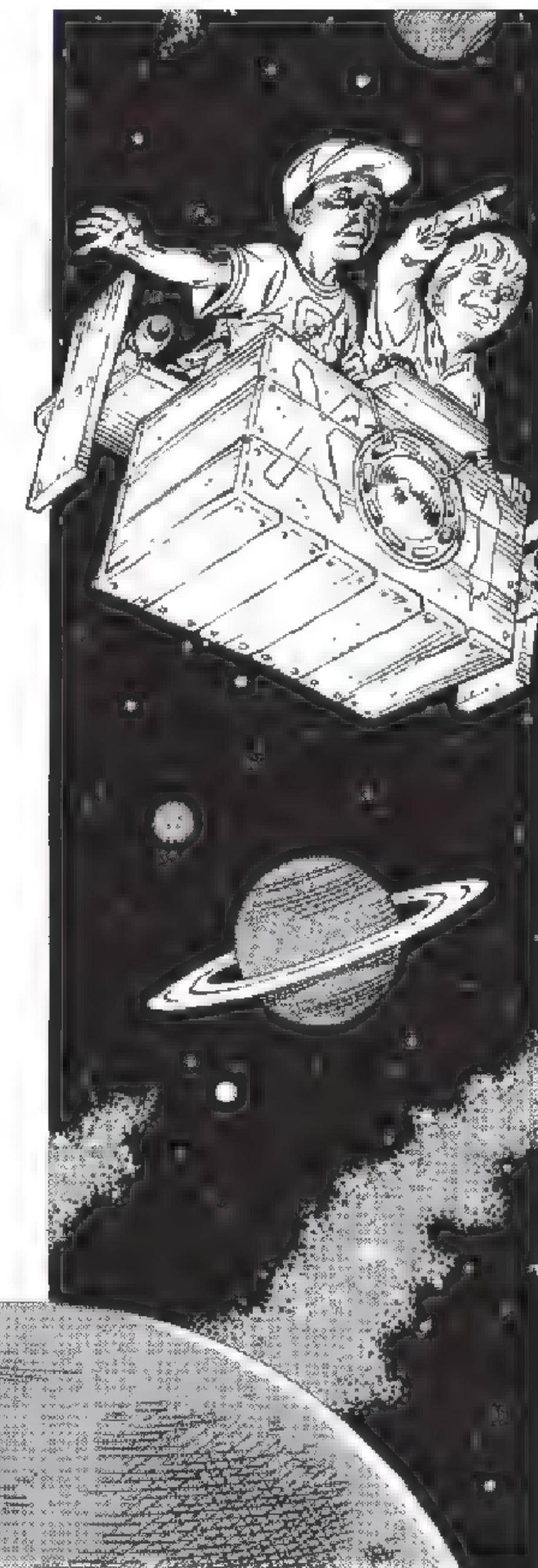
BL: *From even the most rudimentary research, you come across as very driven, single-minded in your vocation, as far back as your teenage years. Did you read many comics as a boy? And if so, which titles really fired your imagination?*

AV: I read comics only occasionally as a boy. None of my crowd was into them. Paperbacks were what drew me, then. When *The Getaway Man*, http://www.vachss.com/getaway_man/index.html, is released, you'll see my homage to that era. When I started working in comics, it was awkward at first, because editors would assume I understood certain references, knew certain characters, etc.

BL: *When people adapt your short stories into other forms, such as the *Hard Looks* comics by Dark Horse and stage/radio adaptations like *Replay*, how much input do you put in?*

AV: As to the comics, when you have writers of the caliber of Chet Williamson, Joe Lansdale, Charles de Lint, James Colbert ... who needs “input?” Instead, I paid close attention, and learned a few things. The stage adaptations work to very specific rules: unlike the movies, not a word of a play can be changed

without consent of the original writer. So the trick there was to pick the best actors. I really scored with David Joe Wirth, who did the original performance of *Placebo*, and Jill Kotler. They're not only brilliant actors, their gestalt is incredible. But



don't take my word for it - see for yourself. The pair performed *Replay* - <http://www.vachss.com/replay/intro.html> - as a radio drama, which you can hear for free on the website. As for versions performed elsewhere, I had no input.

BL: Does everything have to go across your desk for approval, or do you trust to the editors/producers' abilities once you've agreed to work with them?

AV: You asked me, before, what things would I change? Answer is:

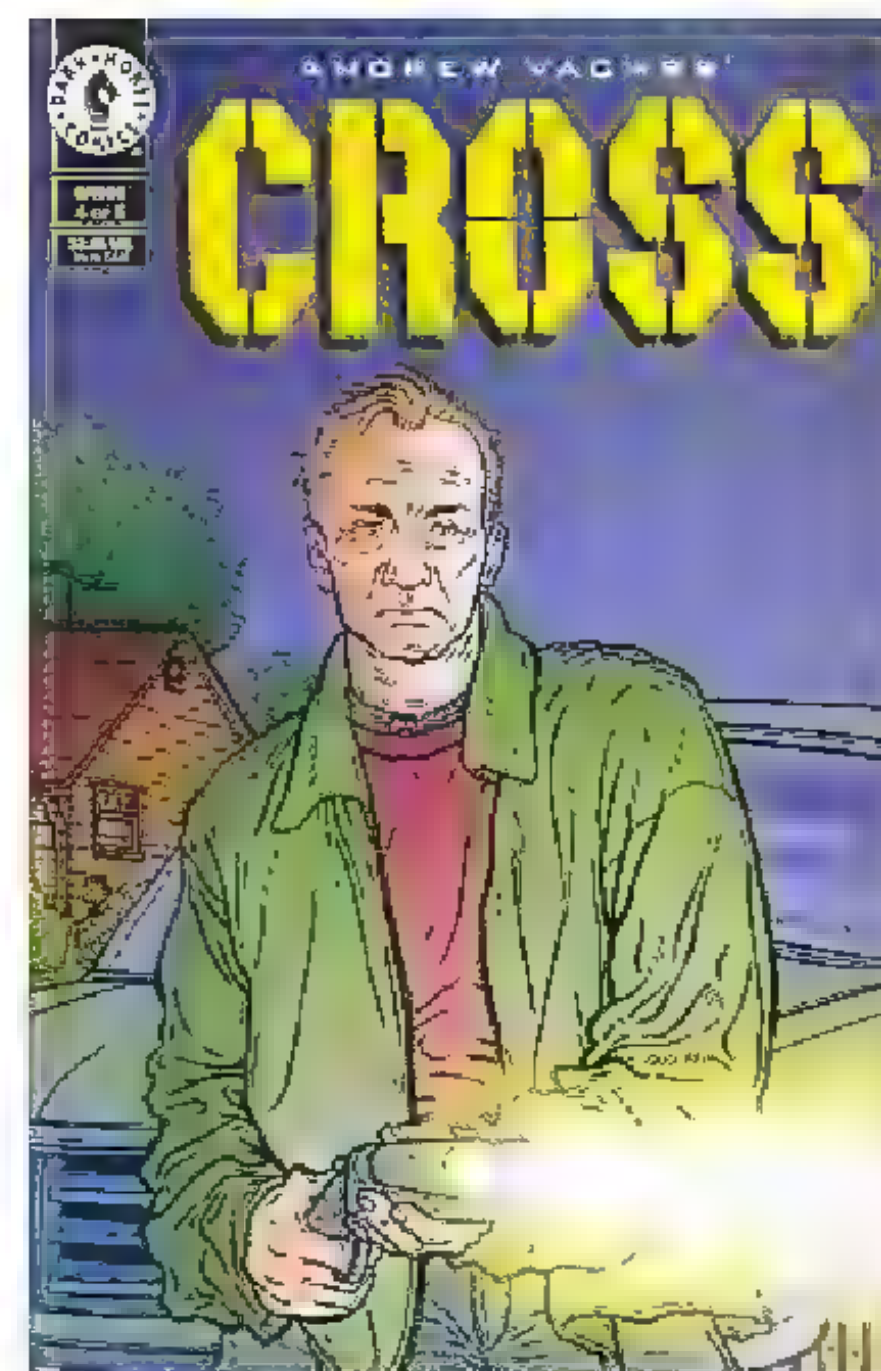
everything now goes across my desk for approval. But this isn't an issue of "trust," it is one of quality control. I (and several members of my crew) each, separately, read the page proofs of all my novels. Not because I don't "trust" my editor at Knopf - Edward Kastenmeier is a writer's dream to work with - but because we want the best possible product. Many of those contributions are not reflected in the credits. For example, without the brilliant input of Ten Angry Pitbulls honcho Lou Bank, *Hard Looks* would not be as beautifully-presented as it is in the newest version.

BL: After the accolades and attention heaped upon *Another Chance To Get It Right*, have you felt under any pressure to produce a follow-up in the same vein? Do you have any desire to do so?

AV: There has been a lot of intense interest expressed in a follow-up to *Another Chance*. I think Mike's idea, to add all-new material to the existing book, was the best solution for now. But, someday, I'd like to do another book like it. My novels are, intentionally, not for everyone - *Another Chance* is. It's the kind of book anyone can read, exploring my one theme from the opposite direction.

I am always characterized as a "dark" writer, but fans have told me they give *Another Chance* as baby-shower gifts and as wedding presents - I can't see them doing that with one of the Burke novels... or, for that matter, *Hard Looks*.

BL: With the new editions of both *Hard Looks* and *Another Chance*, there is additional material included, leaving readers who already own earlier versions with the dilemma of whether to buy them again. Why tinker with them?



AV: Why do people tinker with their cars? Or their weapons? Or anything they built with their own hands? To see if they can make them better. Besides, what writer wouldn't jump at the chance to go back in time and improve his earlier work, while expanding and adding to it at the same time?

BL: You took a couple of sidesteps into licensed character waters with *Predator: Race War* and *Batman: The Ultimate Evil*. Did you find the experiences good, or overly restrictive, when having to deal with the film company suits and Dark Horse/ DC management? Is it something you'd consider doing again, if the right project presented itself?

AV: "Sidesteps" is exactly the right word! I could do a very funny riff on my experiences with the Batman project. Bottom line: working with licensed characters isn't for me. I've turned down several opportunities since then, and plan to continue that strategy.

BL: Of all your prose adapted into comics and other forms, do you have a particular favourite, or favourites?

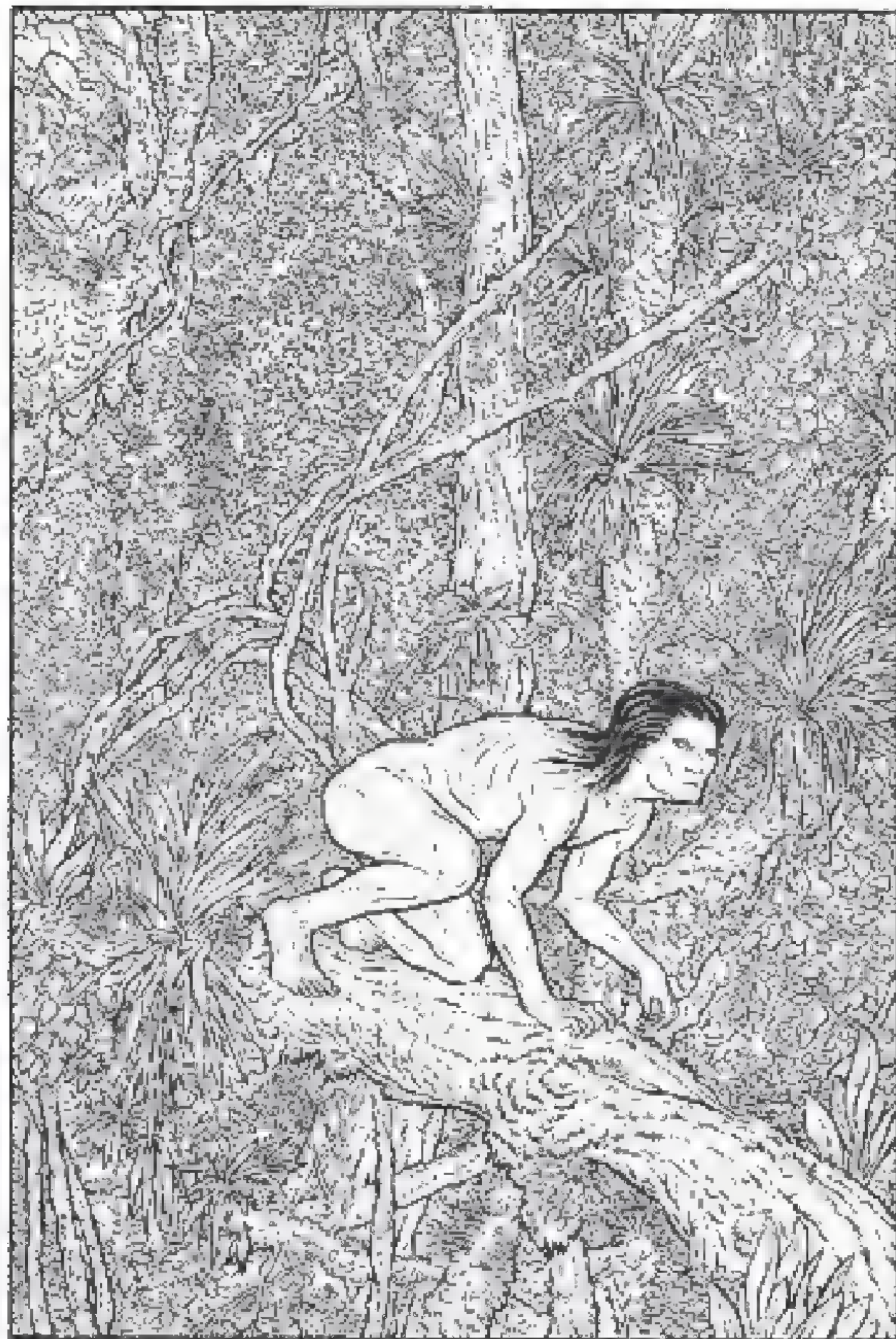
AV: I think my collaboration with Geof Darrow on the long centerpiece in *Another Chance* is my all-time favorite, but there's a long list.

BL: Do you intend to continue working in the comics form, or is the next big stage to shepherd Burke to the silver screen?

AV: I don't see those as mutually exclusive. Anyplace they let me set up my pulpit, I'm going to preach.

***Hard Looks* (3rd Edition) 250 pages \$19.95 US - Contains 11 comics adaptations of Vachss' short fiction, and 6 illustrated prose stories, including a new story: Half-Breed, the first in a new cycle. Published November 2002.**

***Another Chance To Get It Right* (3rd Edition) 88 pages \$11.95 US - 30% larger than previous editions, and contains 20 new pages of prose and illustrations (Love is Behavior written by Vachss, drawn by Frank Caruso, and a new 18 page story called La Corazón Del Niños featuring four all-new full-page illustrations by Geof Darrow, who also supplies a new cover.) Published February 2003.**



CONTINENTAL MILESTONES

Mike Kidson looks at a groundbreaking Franco-Belgian series which just happens to be slightly associated with this month's massive feature on sex comics. Who says this isn't the *Borderline Age of Columnar Crossovers*?...



HERGÉ didn't do female leads. He tried out the idea of a juvenile brother and sister team in his five albums of Jo et Zette stories, and the shrill, monstrous opera diva Bianca Castafiore trilled her way through the pages of numerous Tintin albums like an unstoppable force of nature, but otherwise his female characters were shadowy, silent creatures occasionally glimpsed in crowd scenes. And Hergé's influence on the Franco-Belgian comics mainstream was so all-pervasive that no-one in that field developed a significant female lead, until François

Walthéry's Natacha debuted in 1970 – curiously, just at the time when American publishers were jettisoning all their non-superhero female leads! Walthéry, who practiced his trade during the 1960s drawing a thousand Smurfs in Peyo's studio, credits Spirou chief editor Yvan Delporte with the idea of putting more female characters in the main Franco-Belgian weekly comic. Possibly Delporte was influenced by the enormous success of the Dutch girls' comic Tina, launched in 1967 and reprinting British

material for girls; but for whatever reason, he encouraged Walthéry to draw up a proposal, with a scenario provided by studio colleague Roland Goossens (Gos). What emerged in February 1970 was the adventures of a capable, irascible but sexy air hostess who, together with her equally short-tempered friend and colleague Walter, would deal with hijackers, smugglers and all sorts of criminals in a variety of international locations. Only seven months later, also in Spirou, former Hergé assistant Roger Leloup introduced Yoko Tsuno, a Japanese electronics

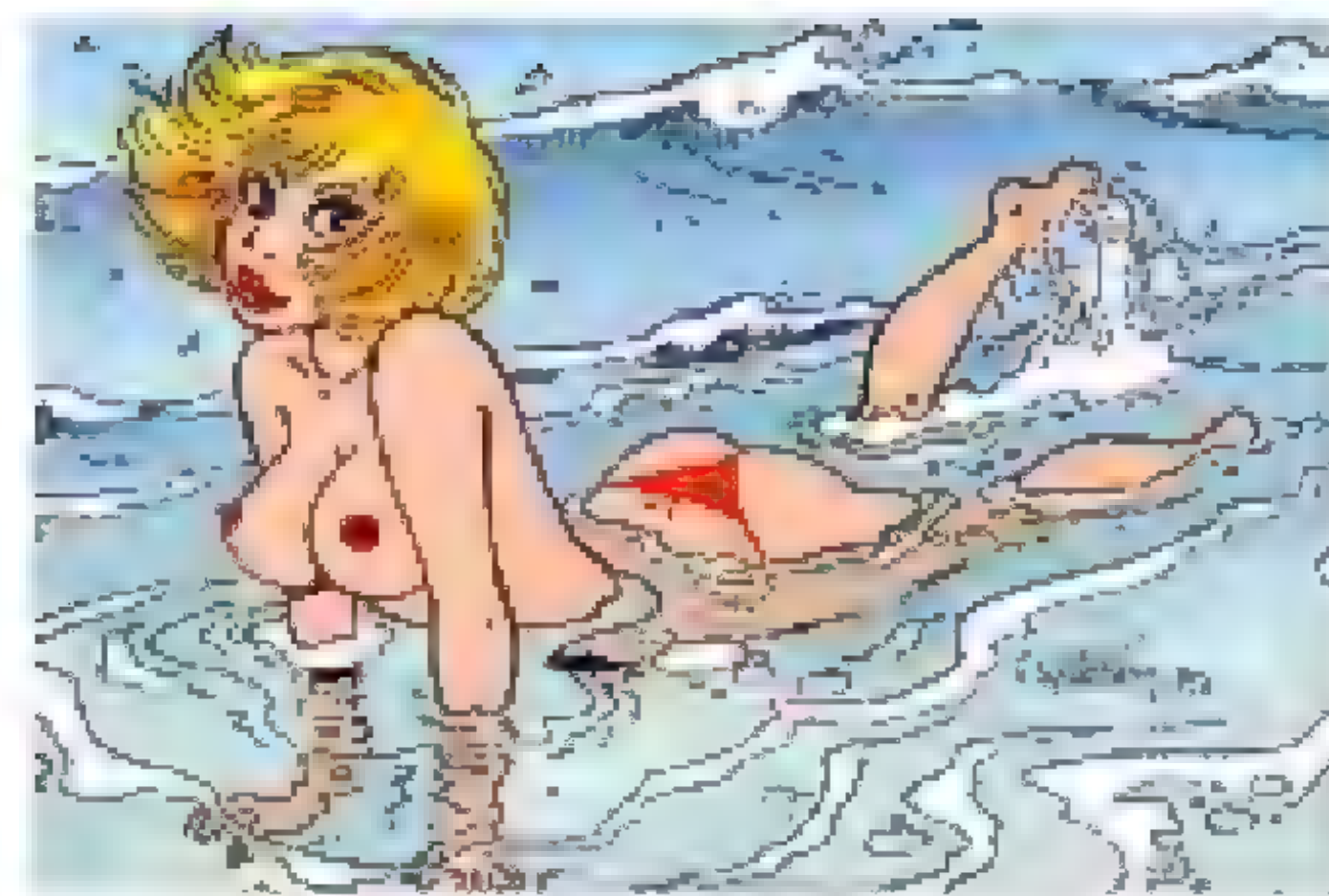
expert and adventurer. Numerous other heroines were to follow, notably Hec Leemans' earthy, uninhibited Rooie Zita in Bakelandt and Jan Bosschaert's dreamy garage mechanic Sam, again in Spirou. The "men only" world of the Franco-Belgian mainstream had been stormed and settled by heroines once and for all.

The heroines appearing in Spirou were necessarily geared to be suitable for children to read. In fact, Walthéry was requested to censor the first Natacha story, a tale of a struggle with hijackers, gold thieves and a plane crash in the South American rain forest, which ended up drawn in a very restrained line, full of detail and humour but with very little sensuality to it. By the third arc, though, Walthéry was drawing a much more curvaceous heroine, and beginning to include scenes of her slipping into jeans and disappearing into showers. He was already producing a few mildly erotic strips for venues other than Spirou, and when by the eleventh album he was showing Natacha climbing out of the bed that she'd shared the night before with a drunken, unconscious Walter, he was following a natural and highly commercial trend. It was all very innocent: the stories, all

primarily fast-paced humorous thrillers, always made it very clear that there was nothing more than very close friendship between the two leads, and only permitted

other male characters to show a strictly romantic interest in the heroine. But as Walthéry's art style softened and relaxed, Natacha became more and more a pin-up character, and a large part of the series' enduring success must be ascribed to its appeal to an adult male audience.

Numerous apocrypha to the main series leave no doubt



about how widely Natacha is perceived as a comic strip sex symbol. Several sex comics parodies have been published – including two brief ones drawn by Walthéry himself – and an album of tributes by fellow creators, produced in 1990 to celebrate the series' twentieth anniversary, emphasizes the readers' dreams of getting Natacha's



Above: Endpapers from a 1993 Natacha album reprint and right at the top a more saucy example.

clothes off. To the Anglophone reader this may seem an extraordinary development in a series devised for a children's comic; but it could be compared with the development of Marvel's The Avengers, originally a children's comic, into the current bestseller for adult readers, The Ultimates. The wider the appeal of a comics character, the greater its chances of lasting success, and, having successfully opened up the Franco-Belgian mainstream to female characters, Walthéry went on to even greater success by making Natacha appealing to that mainstream's readers of all ages.

Since Natacha ceased to appear in Spirou at the end of the 1980s, only three further albums have appeared – occasional new sketches

and posters still emerge, the album collections all remain in print, but the first heroine really to break through into the Franco-Belgian mainstream appears to have reached the end of her comics adventures in 1998. Walthéry continues to develop comic strip heroines, though. Rubine, a thriller about a redheaded Chicago cop who is totally professional and totally uninterested in romance, is plotted by him, written and drawn by others and has just reached its eighth album. More recently, the overtly erotic Une Femme dans la Peau, a thriller with a Frankenstein-like premise, was launched in 2000. But as yet there is no sign of him devising so successful and widely popular a creation as Natacha continues to be.



Walthéry's latest sexy and slightly revealing heroines

IN SEARCH OF... MARIE SEVERIN

This month David McIntock caused us some pretty feverish searching for illustrations...



AS the controversy/publicity hype rages over the all new, all hip (oooh! what hips), all gay **Rawhide Kid**, drawn by the evergreen John Severin in his classical style, what better time could one choose to go off in search of, no, not John, but his sister Marie? Often referred to as "The First Lady of Comics", and quite possibly the only name many of us aging fanboys could muster when asked to name a female comics person (excepting, of course, some pneumatic fictional heroine of our fantasies), Marie is now semi-retired, and regularly fêted when she makes convention appearances. And rightly so. All my research pointed to the fact that she was indeed "The Nicest Person In Comics", and one couldn't find a single bad word said about the lady. So bang go my credentials as a tabloid journalist. But, as ever, I digress, which is an old man's prerogative. Just as it is a woman's never to reveal her age. I could find that Marie's birthday is August 21st, making her a Leo if you're into that nonsense (as a Taurus I believe none of it mesel') but a discreet silence abounds as to the year of her origin appearance. And why not? Just as, and this is a secret between me and you, so no

telling now, I thought for years that "Marie" was actually a French male name, so I er, well, thought that, well, you know... Or am I getting mixed up

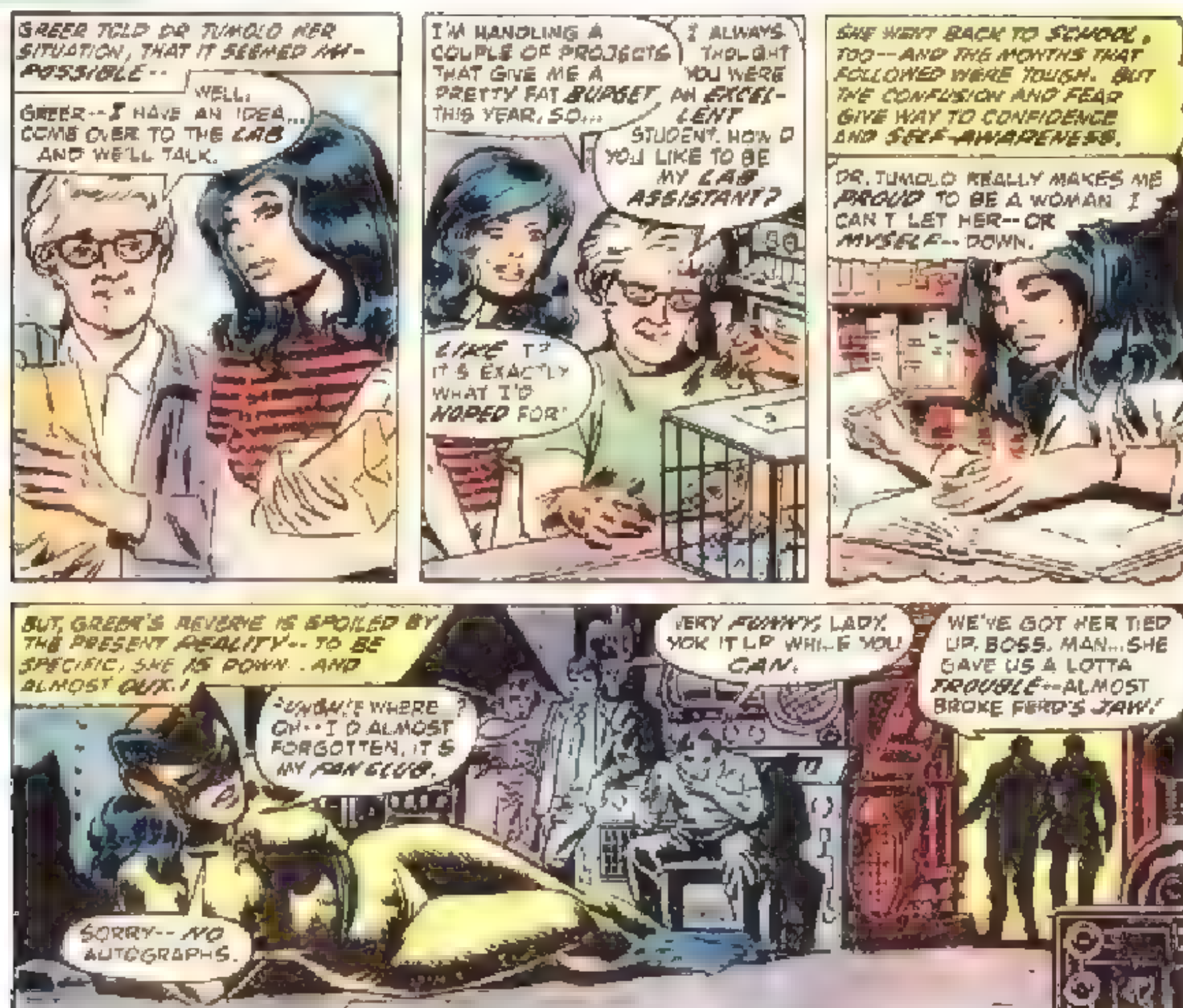
with Sal Buscema? You can't expect anyone who's been there to remember the Sixties, can you?

Moving along, "Talent Pool 20 – Marie Severin" at www.fortunecity.com/tatooine/niven/142/talentpo/tp20.html (where *do* these people get their addresses from?) has a potted biog of Ms. Severin, beginning with her work at EC where she "served in support functions... inking, lettering and colour". She worked on **Crime Suspense Stories**, **Haunt of Fear**, **Panic** and **Weird Science**, to name but a few. She performed a similar role for Marvel from 1959 on, before tackling more meaty assignments pencilling or inking on **Strange Tales** (following Ditko on *Dr. Strange* must have been a bit like trying to replace George Best at Manchester United), **Sub-Mariner**, **Captain America**, **The Hulk**, and, it says here, "her handsomest work" on **Kull**, inked of course by bro' John. Talent Pool (I suspect not his real name) touches on the "infamous Herb Trimpe diary" (*still* no sign of that Ditko one yet), which "mentions Severin's dismissal by Marvel in the mid-90s bloodbath". Her "comments on her career remain conspicuously benign and serene... she describes her days in

the Bullpen in uplifting and optimistic tones". "More gallant Marvel stalwarts" are said to "fawn over her". Lucky Marie.

<http://www.lambiek.net/severin/marie.htm> adds that she was born on Long Island, NY but, curses, neglects to say when. She apparently "wanted to be a stained glass artist... but brother John talked her into colouring comics at EC". Good for John. Otherwise we wouldn't be able to enjoy more from our chums at SAMCCI who display "10 Great Marie Severin Covers" on http://www.samcci.comics.org/artists/severin_m.htm. All About Comix – EC Comics on www.allaboutcomix.com/publisher-ec.html reports that "a famous EC





story has it that colourist Marie Severin disapproved of particularly gory scenes and would colour them blue". Which challenges me to add a witty rejoinder... a challenge Ms. Severin has me too scared to take on. We know our strong-minded women here in Govan and fear them accordingly.

There are a few interviews with Severin around the net, which is great for us true Scots who treat cash like a family heirloom. "A Phone Call with Marie Severin", originally published in *The Comics Journal*, is at http://www.tcj.com/237/i_severin.html and fully demonstrates Marie's sense of humour... she jokes about selling kisses at her booth at a convention, among other things. She only worked on a couple of issues of **Mad** magazine and, at last the first chink of irritation, she's irked that she parted with original art for around \$10 - \$30 and now sees it

sell for \$450 or so. She is modest about her Marvel work where she "designed, sketched, did mastheads and, once in a while I'd do a story". An article from *Comic Book Artist* #10 is presented at www.twomorrows.com/comicbookartist/articles/10slumber.html, wherein Severin reminisces on her experiences in comics, along with Ramona Fradon and Trina Robbins. Besides being a great fun read, one did note that one of these three fine talents talked a bit more than the others. Guess who? Trina does manage to get a few words in on her own site, <http://comics.212.net/trinarobbins/>, and a mention or two of our wee Marie.

Marie (and I might be presumptuous here in using her first name, but hey, it's a mighty wide ocean so I reckon I can take the chance) says of my hero Steve Ditko, "I like Ditko... I get along fine with him. It's a shame he

doesn't take advantage of the money he could make on drawing and those recreations like so many pros are doing". You'll find that on www.ditko.comics.org/ditko/why/whyquote.html as yet another part of the stonking Ditko Looked Up site. Quite why that brings me back to The Cliff Guy - www.thecliffguy.com/02_cliff_severin.htm - at this moment could only be conjectured, or be due to the effects of several Deuchars (Scotland's bestest beer), but Marie contributes a nice wee photie of Dr. Doom and some absurd purple dinosaur thing from US kids' TV. Which *does* bring me to a Fraggles Rock page - with an address way too long to print - which mentions Severin's work on the Fraggles Rock comics and annuals. I do note one writer here as a "Barbara McLintock", which for some reason made my mind stray to the TV incarnation of *League of Gentlemen* and a certain taxi driver....

There's plenty of photies (it's a



Govan word, I'm feeling homesick) of Marie around, including www.friends-lulu.org/awards2000.html where Severin is picking up her Lulu award. Now that's something that *really* does have a different connotation in Glasgow... She's collecting her Hall of Fame Award at www.comic-con.org/pages/2001Eisners.html. Other images are at www.nyccomicbookmuseum.org/exhibits/women_2001.htm, which adds "at one point Marie Severin actually set a match on fire in a pair of her editor's shoes... while he was still wearing them". (Is that ocean wide enough?) And there's an awfy nice wee collection of images in Gene Colan's Photo Album, at www.genecolan.com/photos.htm. It really is a joy to have these legends among us still.

You'll find some rare Severin art on www.collectingfool.com/prelimgal.html, which features some of her sketched ideas for comic covers, showing a lovely flowing brush style. There's more of the same at www.comiccafe.net/originalart.html including a **Thor** cover rough.

www.hometown.aol.com/hulkcollector/severin.html has five Severin sketchographs to view. Must be something Hulk collectors do.

I did briefly examine the dozens of genealogy sites dedicated to the name "Severin", which hinted that the name was Belgian in origin. The American fascination with where they came from is highly amusing to a Scot descended from



Vikings (in my dreams) as surely they'll find a rogue or two in the barrel. But is there any possibility of a rogue Belgian? And there's also some bloke in the French government who's a Severin, not that I could find any of his comics [how about the bloke in the *Sacher-Masoch* novel and the *Velvet Underground* song? - Production Ed.]. Which leads me to the end of this month's drivel. If you're reading this, Marie, next time you're in Scotland, I'll buy the drinks. Heck, I'd even buy them in Edinburgh.

McLintock on Severin

Previous page illustrations from the top: Marie Severin drew many tiny illos for EC text stories, like this one from *Crime SuspenStories* #19 (1953) & at the bottom: Spoofing the superheroes - Marvel's *Not Brand Echh* #9 (1968). This page: Interior art from Marvel's *The Cat* #1 (1972), inked by Wally Wood; One of her last Marvel covers, inked by Joe Sinnott (1980); Marie draws Howard The Duck (1980)...

12 O'CLOCK LOCK

This month Selina Lock reflects on the world of comics she inhabited during 2002...

IT'S been quite an exciting year comics-wise for me, as I actually managed to produce a small press comic and I started writing for **Borderline**. If someone had told me, when I was introduced to the wacky world of comics at the Bristol Comics Festival in 1999, that in two years I'd be producing them and even writing about them for an online publication, I'd have thought that person slightly deranged. However, here I am so maybe I'm slightly deranged instead.

I think the main thing I've found this year is how supportive fandom and comic creators can be. I mean, the first artist I was ever introduced

to at Comics 1999, Simon Fraser, drew the cover for **The Girly Comic** #1 and quite a few of the British fans I met at that convention have contributed or supported the comic in some way. Comics fandom has its cliques and bitchiness just like any other fandom, but on the whole I've found that if you look in the right places there are many more dedicated, lovely fans out there than there are ones that want to do nothing but trash the medium. Like the people who create **Borderline** and those that write for websites like *Sequential Tart*, *SavantMag* and *Ninth Art*, all those people that want to promote comics because they love them and who probably don't get thanked as much as they should for the work they do.

It's also been a year of discovery about producing comics, finding out things such as how much ink it really does take for a laser printer to produce a 44 page comic (more than I'd budgeted for!), and how much discipline it takes to edit an anthology comic (more than I have, and I'm still working on that!). Also, how much alcohol a room full of comics fans can consume (I'd already guessed "quite a lot" but, year on year, it seems to come as somewhat of a shock to the staff at the Bristol hotels...), and how much air conditioning really is needed at

conventions when you're sitting behind a table all day.

It's also been a year of discovery reading comics; I've realised how much I enjoy the thrill of picking up a new trade paperback I've been waiting for, or finding a new creator I like. Some of my top comics for 2002 are:

- **Amy Unbounded: Belondweg Blossoming** by Rachel Hartman. Those of you who read my review of this will know that I adored the characters, story and art in this book.

- **Hopeless Savages** by Jen Van Meter and various artists. A success for free comics day as I picked up the **Hopeless Savages** giveaway at Forbidden Planet in London and was prompted to buy the trade.

- **Midnight, Mass** by John Rozum, Jesús Saiz and Jimmy Palmiotti. I like supernatural detective stories and this one is especially nice as it features a couple working together, instead of in disaccord. Sort of like *Hart To Hart* for the Buffy Generation.
- **Fables** by Bill Willingham, Lan Medina, Mark Buckingham and Steve Leialoha. As mentioned in a previous column I like the way this work explores old stories in a new way.

- **Herobear And The Kid** by Mike Kunkel. Issue 5 of this much delayed story arc just blew me away when I read it recently.

- **Fade From Blue (left)** by Myatt Murphy and Scott Dalrymple. This



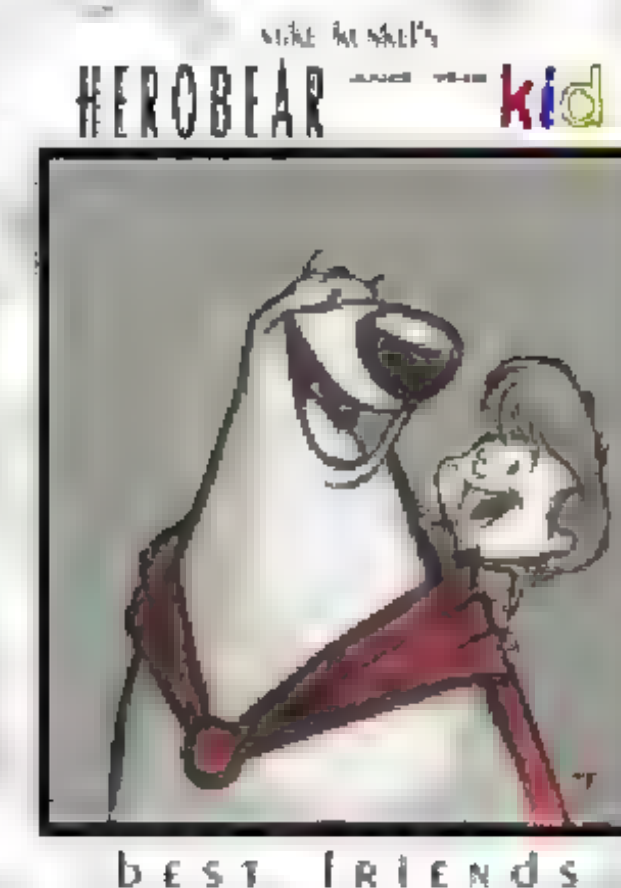
is one of my current favourites as it has characters that you can really connect with. It reminds me of early **Strangers in Paradise** before all the crime storylines got out of hand. I'm hoping this series keeps the characters' mysterious pasts more rooted in reality than **Strangers In Paradise** managed.

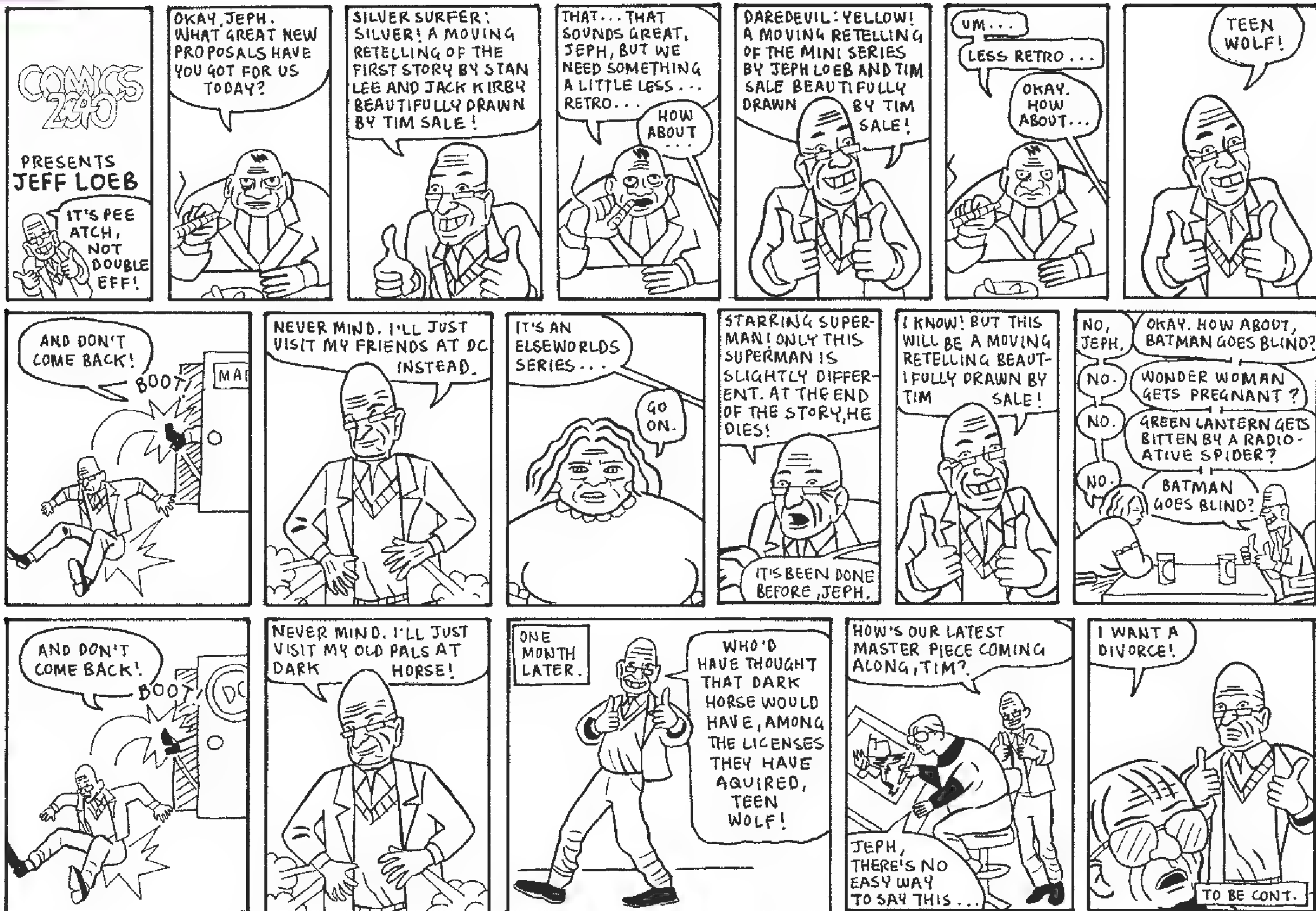
There are numerous other works I could also mention - and I'm continually amazed at the amount of comics and graphic novels I now read compared to only 4 years ago. Hopefully, 2003 will bring even more new creators, old creators and characters into my reading sphere. Some of the ones I'm looking forward to seeing are the rest of the issues of **Three Days In Europe** by Antony Johnston and Mike Hawthorne, more of Carla Speed McNeil's **Finder** trades, as this is a perennial favourite, another issue of **Planetary**, David Mack getting back to writing and illustrating a regular **Kabuki** series, and

undoubtedly lots more good stuff from Oni Press.

I hope that Santa Claus brought us all some lovely comics for Christmas and that we all have a happy, comic-tastic New Year!

12 O'Clock Lock will return in Licence To Kill.





THE VERDICT

COMICS REVIEWS

Borderline's policy is that we don't mark a comic out of ten or some other archaic method of rating. A single comic or a series should be judged on a number of things, therefore we encourage our reviewers to make a judgement about a specific issue. This is why Borderline's review column is the best and fairest in comics!

THIS MONTH'S JURY:



Danny Black (DB)
David R. Booth (DRB)
Andrew Cheverton (AC)
Kelvin Green (KG)
Rol Hirst (RH)
Mike Kidson (MK)
Martin Shipp (MS)
Andy Winter (AW)

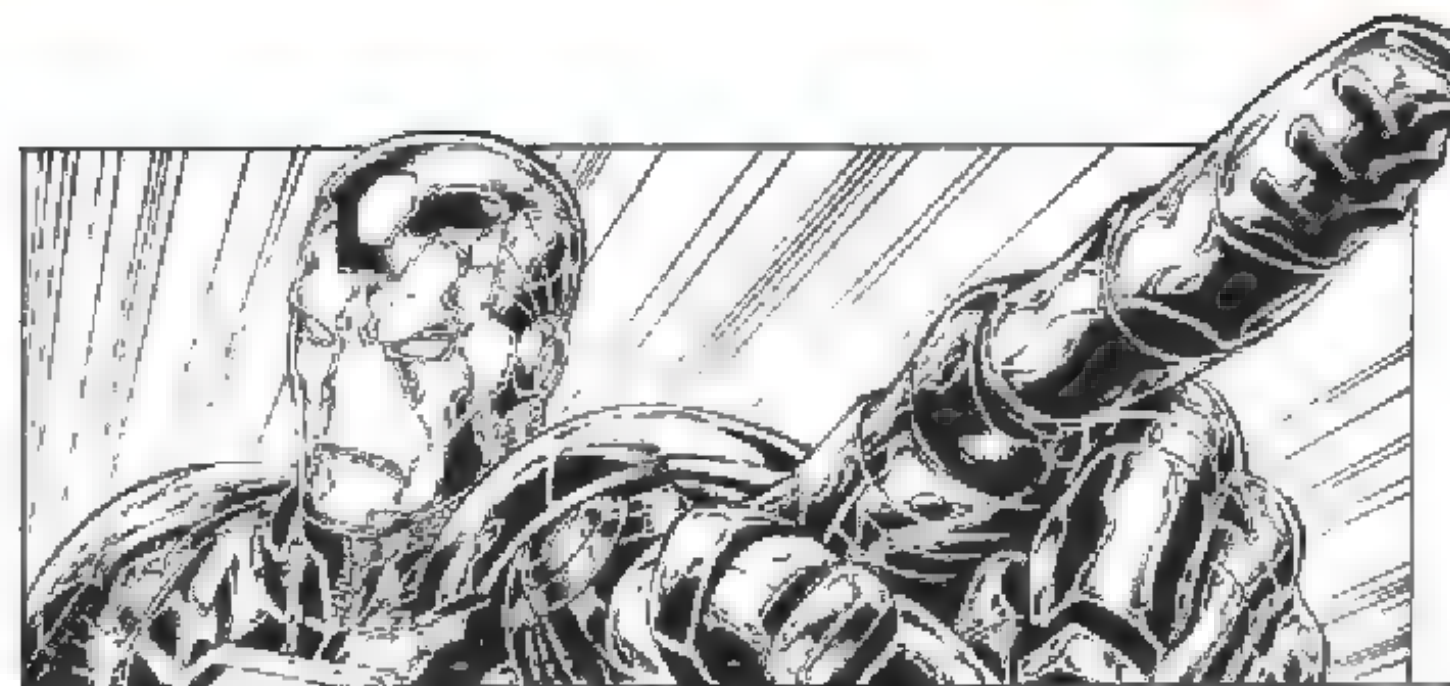


Have you got a book that requires a Verdict?
Then send it to Borderline (details on page 2.)
Have you got a Verdict on a book? Yes? Then Borderline wants you!
Contact Martin Shipp: martinshipp@borderlinemagazine.co.uk
for reviewing details.

Aquaman #1

By Rick Veitch, Yvel Guichet and Mark Propst
DC

Aquaman, convicted of being the Great Devastation that sank Atlantis way way back in this month's JLA, is stripped of his royalty and expelled from his kingdom. Worse! He's also lost his ability to telepathically command all marine life and in fact they all hate him anyway, so he gets beaten up by a bunch of crabs and can't even go for a job in SeaWorld. Suddenly the Arthurian Legend gets dragged in, which is fairly apt given A'man's name is Arthur, or Orin, and (we assume) the Lady In The Lake gives him a new hand to replace that big metal spike he's had since, ooh, his last life-changing new series. This new hand's blue and made of water. How's he going to hold his pint?
The Verdict: Great characters don't need constant revamping. (MS)



sovereign nation by the UN, a tum of events that makes the US rather stropic. A lack of editorial attention is again evident as spelling errors and continuity glitches abound, and some of the dialogue fails to match the art in the panels. The characterisation and plotting are still off, reading as if important

events have occurred behind the scenes, or in other comics altogether. Perhaps it would be a good idea to resurrect the annotations used during Kurt Busiek's run? The Verdict: Someone is making a mess of this once great title; whether it's Johns himself or his editors, it's swiftly becoming unreadable. (KG)



Avengers #60 and #61

By Geoff Johns, Kieron Dwyer (#60) and Gary Frank (#61)
Marvel

Illogical character development and shoddy plotting characterise this laughable end to Geoff Johns' first story arc. There's plenty of clichéd gloating villainy from the absurdly camp antagonist, as well as an unconvincing attempt in the epilogue to make the cheesy nature of this plot seem as if it were a clever post-modern twist. The art is generally good, but there is some confused storytelling at points, which, along with the scrappy scripting, makes this read as if it was rushed or that some last minute additions were needed to make it make sense. Which they don't.

In issue 61, Gary Frank illustrates perhaps the most bizarre Avengers plot ever, as the team are declared a

GOOD COP –BAD COP

The Authority: Scorched Earth
By Robbie Morrison and Frazer Irving

Vertigo

I'll be perfectly honest: I picked this up because I saw the name Morrison on the cover and wondered what the mad old sod would do with the baddest superteam of them all. But it turned out this Morrison is Robbie, not Grant. Doesn't mean he does a bad job, though he seems to have ditched the more outré narrative devices - the Carrier no longer surfs the monkey of resistentialism between inanimate universes - in favour of conventional captions and dialogues. And we can but hope that this story's tie-in to the StormWatch of old isn't an augur of continuity-freakery to come. Former *Borderline Drawing Board* subject Frazer Irving gives the Doctor and Apollo some really bad haircuts - they look like Art Garfunkel and the young Rt. Hon Alan Clark respectively - but otherwise his modern woodcut style brings a refreshing change after the detail overload of the last series. Whether his simpler style will be suited to enormous double-page spreads is something we'll have to wait and see. Nonetheless, Wildstorm's courage in going for a creative team so unlike their predecessors must be applauded. So applaud.

The Verdict: A good, if overpriced omen for Morrison's crack at the revived ongoing series. San Francisco's a woman? (Martin Shipp is the Good Cop)

Two of 2000AD's hottest talents take on the industry's most controversial superhero group and the result proves



substantially less than the sum of its parts. Apart from Jack Hawksmoor and The Engineer (who share the book's two best scenes), *Nikolai Dante* scribe Morrison struggles to get to grips with the characters and it isn't long before matters degenerate into one long fight scene, occasionally punctuated by convoluted plot exposition ("I replicated the technology that cages the baby universe at the centre of the carrier") and laboured attempts at living up to the title's "action movie" reputation. His Sun-powered supervillain also reveals a particularly cringe-worthy line in self-righteous angst: "Rivers red with genocidal blood. Religions that preach fear and hatred and atrocity. Governments that strip the Earth bare and piss all over her." Crikey!

Irving's unusual, even Colan-esque style, meanwhile, seems better suited to the darker, more atmospheric tales he's told in 2000AD - *Necronauts*, *Storming Heaven*, *A Love Like Blood* - than it does to a superhero book, albeit one with The Authority's skewed take on the genre.

The Verdict: A disappointing first Authority outing for Morrison. Let's hope his run on 2003's revamped ongoing series proves more fruitful. (Andy Winter is the Bad Cop)



Gun Fu #1

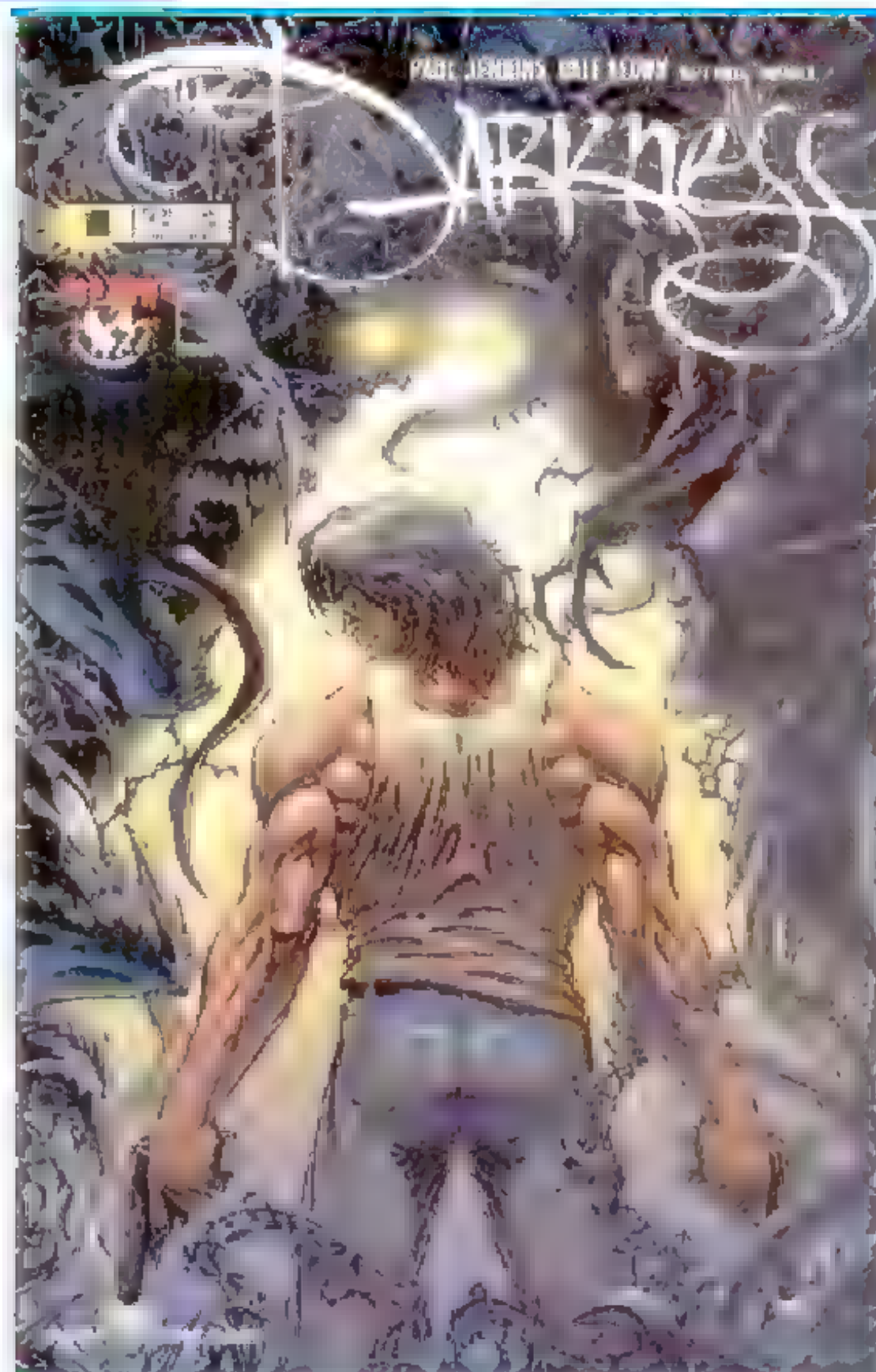
By Howard M. Shum and Joey Mason
Axiom

"Welcome to the world of Gun Fu. The year is 1936. Cheng Bo Sen is a gun-shooting, kung fu-using Hong Kong cop. He also speaks hip-hop, which no-one seems to notice..."

This was so much fun, I read it twice. If I hadn't just wasted twenty minutes trying to decipher Kabuki: The Ghost Play, I might have read it a third time...

Imagine Kevin Smith and Mike Mignola writing together; imagine character design pitched between *The Powerpuff Girls* and *Samurai Jack*; imagine direction by John Woo and the Wachowski Brothers; imagine giant Nazi Robot Soldiers, blonde female mad scientists and Charlie Chan's Number One Son getting hold of an Uzi and some angel dust.

You've just imagined Gun Fu.
The Verdict: The sort of sharp, clean-lined and fast-paced stuff that used to be the province of Marvel and DC; of its kind, a fine example. (AC)



The Darkness #1

By Paul Jenkins & Dale Keown
Image/Top Cow

I never read *The Darkness* volume 1, so I had no idea what to expect from volume 2. I came in with a clean slate and I didn't expect much. So, imagine my surprise when I discovered that this was a superb opening issue with a tight, explanatory script and some utterly breathtaking visuals from Dale Keown.

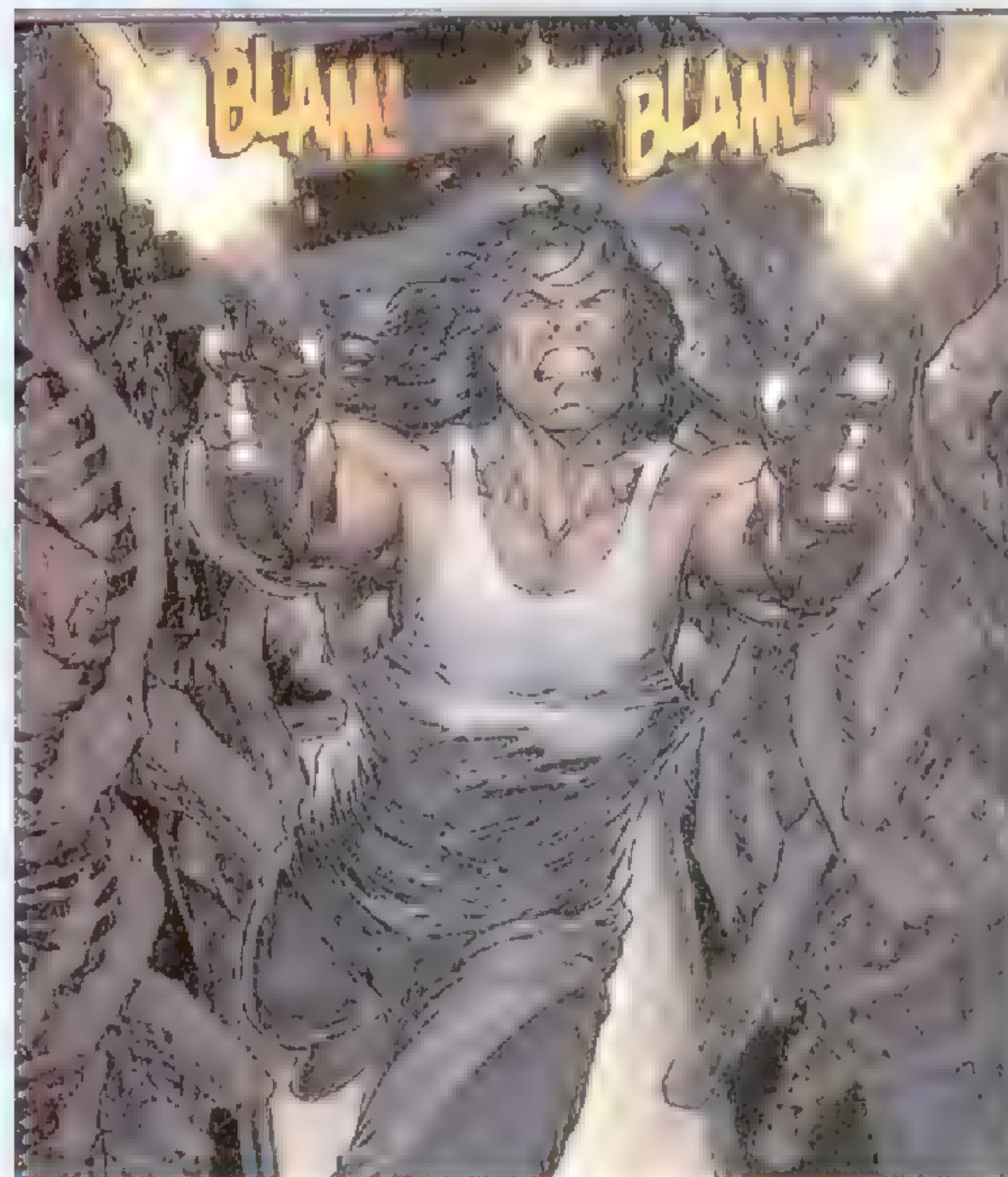
Keown... remember him? He took the comics world by storm in the late 1980s when he drew *Incredible Hulk*, then disappeared to be a semi-reclusive rock musician, producing the odd issue of his creator-owned series *Pitt* and little else until this year's new *Hulk* work for Marvel. Why? The man is quite possibly one of the greatest artists ever to grace US action/adventure comics and this debut issue does nothing but reinforce that accolade even more. He has done a superb job here - from gentle talking head scenes to all-out splatter gore horror.

While I've always considered Keown to be high on my list of comics talent, Paul Jenkins languishes down at the subterranean level of "mediocre writer". He's a sort of British Kurt Busiek - Jenkins has some good ideas, has done some good comics, but you remember his stuff for all the wrong reasons. Freed of all his continuity baggage, though, he has turned in a very good issue here. It has enough intrigue to keep you reading, there is enough revealed so that you don't feel as though you're too far out of your depth before you start, and there are

enough suspenseful clichés thrown in for the reader to nod his head in appreciation rather than slinging accusations of plagiarism. Having said all that, this does feel like *The Sopranos* meets *Angel*. But that isn't a bad thing at all.

The story picks up, presumably, from some form of conclusion to the previous series. Jackie Estacado is a hitman for the mob: he is also a decent man carrying a horrible and sinister secret. Jackie's come back after being believed dead. He's Clint Eastwood's "man with no name" for the opening pages, hardly opening his mouth, but when he does the story falls out. After an interlude to set up the issue's bad guys Jackie returns, this time as Bruce Willis in *Last Man Standing* and all hell, literally, breaks loose. The issue ends on a nasty, inconclusive note and even if Dale Keown hadn't drawn it I would still want to know what the score was and that will mean buying it. So this revamped version of *The Darkness* has succeeded already - it has attracted someone who has never read an issue to the fold. Well done, there're few comics nowadays that can boast about that.

The Verdict: John Woo meets *Hellraiser* - this is classy stuff and as long as Keown stays on the book it has "winner" embossed in gold leaf all over it! (DRB)



Gotham Central #1

By Ed Brubaker, Greg Rucka and
Michael Lark
DC

The Bat-Signal doesn't fall on the brave men and women of Gotham City Police Department, as they try to solve a super-villain-related crime before "The Bat" becomes involved. The notion that GCPD feel demeaned, almost emasculated by the success of Batman's vigilantism is an intriguing one, and the book looks gorgeous with Michael Lark inking his own pencils. But how long can a non-Batman Batman book, especially a non-costume one, last? On this showing it'd be wonderful to say "a long time", but reality says it's another of those beautiful losers we sometimes talk about around here. The Verdict: Really should be a huge success if there was any justice in the world. But there's not. (MS)

Hawaiian Dick #1

By B. Clay Moore and Steven Griffin
Image

I really liked the look of the preview art for this title (see *Young Guns* in *Borderline* #13) – Griffin's chunky, moody, resolutely unglamorous style seemed just right for a *noir* detective series, and had the extra advantage of not showing much in the way of obvious comicbook influences. So I made a point of picking up this first issue, to see how his work came across in a narrative context.

It comes across very well. Clay Moore's script is sharp stuff, hitting all the right notes of tough talk and sleazy

goings-on while setting up character and background without ever laying it on too thick – an impressive feat, given how little I know about Hawaii in the 1950s. Griffin's art meshes with it well, backing up the verbal characterisation with strong visual cues and keeping events flowing swiftly and comprehensibly.

It's a pleasure to read such a stylish essay in a genre too little attempted these days by the major companies – and it's also worth noting that it's another good move in Image's campaign to lose the poor reputation that too many of its founders saddled it with a decade ago.

The Verdict: A fine traditional 'tec story with a powerful, unconventional look. (MK)



image
#1 52.95
B. CLAY MOORE
STEVEN GRIFFIN



The Incredible Hulk #48

By Bruce Jones and
Stuart Immonen
Marvel

As we enter the final stretch of this story arc we find Bruce Banner face to face with the increasingly insane Agent Pratt. Partnered by Sandra Verdugo, Banner is taunted into battle with Pratt. But Pratt has an ace up his sleeve, Verdugo's son.

What follows is some background story on Pratt and why he's undergone some startling physical changes. We get no further information about the secret conspiracy, and our green friend doesn't make an appearance.

Immonen never fails to amaze. With Scott Koblish on inks and Studio F on colour he continues to produce that sinister feel that has complemented the story so far. A fight scene in the rain is handled with wonderful clarity and keeps your attention despite some verbose dialogue. My one concern is that Immonen might not get the chance actually to draw the Hulk before his tenure on the book is up!

Bruce Jones is creating a fantastically tense story and manages to convey the confusion experienced by Banner, portraying him as a man on the edge in an insane situation that he doesn't fully understand. In creating such a good story, though, Jones is running a real risk of alienating the Hulk fans who want to see a more action-based incarnation. That's one of the kinds of risks that Marvel has taken of late, but here that risk is made more frightening when you consider that the *Hulk* film is waiting in the wings. It must be a major concern for the Marvel accountants and PR people that this comic currently has no Hulk and no spandex-style action – but the worst thing that they could do is to remove Jones from the title, as he is creating a classic rendition of the Green Goliath. Perhaps we should've had an "Ultimate Hulk" or a miniseries to coincide with the release of the film.

Special mention should be given to another in a continuing series of fantastic Kaare Andrews covers. I notice that Marvel have, at last, started crediting him on the inside.

The Verdict: Marvel's best comic right now – Jones shows us how a thriller should be written and manages to do it without gimmicks. (DB)



JLA #75

By Joe Kelly, Doug Mahnke, Yvel Guichet,
Darryl Banks and Dietrich Smith
DC

In which a story that seems to have been going on for far longer than its actual six issues comes to a close. Joe Kelly has a sure and light touch with the characters – he can do more with Wonder Woman in one page than has been done in the last three years of her own title – but his plots do tend to be very complicated and very fast-moving, and he does tend to assume certain levels of intelligence and of familiarity on the part of the readership. This isn't a bad thing – it makes reading Kelly's books a lot more fun than most – but it can test the patience a little when you have absolutely no idea who half of the people you're reading about actually are. Still, it looks very pretty despite having four pencillers and as many inkers, and at the end of it all we have a new Aqua-

man title to look forward to. Sorry, what was that? The Verdict: It's annoying that six issues of a comic have been nothing but a big publicity campaign for another comic. (MS)



Kabuki: The Ghost Play

By David Mack
Image



I remember, almost exactly seven years ago, reading the final issue of Kabuki: Circle of Blood and being amazed as the disparate themes and story details of the previous five issues came together in a beautifully orchestrated mesh that could have served as the very definition of something being more than the sum of its parts.

Since that triumphant moment we have had from creator David Mack more and more obscure and redundant Kabuki comics that haven't served to propel the story much beyond the climax of issue nine of the Image run, with many accompanying sideline stories and sketchbooks diverting the path still further.

In short: David Mack would be well advised to pull his head out of his ass. The Ghost Play is artistic masturbation of the first order, a wearying succession of ugly photo-collages bereft of any impact or meaning beyond that which the reader - already familiar with the story elements from previous issues - brings to the page.

The photographs - infinite repetitions of Barbie dolls, commercially available Kabuki masks, kimono material and some model we might assume to be Mrs. Mack - are poorly staged and badly reproduced. The collaging technique seems almost wilfully mannered and uninteresting. The actual written storytelling is hindered by cutup pieces of extraneous text that confuse and misdirect the eye.

In fact, this looks like some artless buffoon attempting to emulate Mack, but only managing to parody the worst excesses of his pretension and over-earnest belief in his own worth and talent. The Verdict: The nadir of a career that stalled after Circle of Blood, and crashed altogether after Kabuki #9; witless, artless, worthless garbage. (AC)

Leave it to Chance #13

By James Robinson and Paul Smith
Image

How bizarre: after waiting three and a half years for one of the most infuriating comics cliffhangers in recent memory to be resolved, we find that the creators have jumped forward a year from the events of issue 12 and are now telling a story in flashback, itself set seven weeks on from the aforementioned issue 12. I should feel cheated, but mostly I'm just grateful: Leave it to Chance is back.

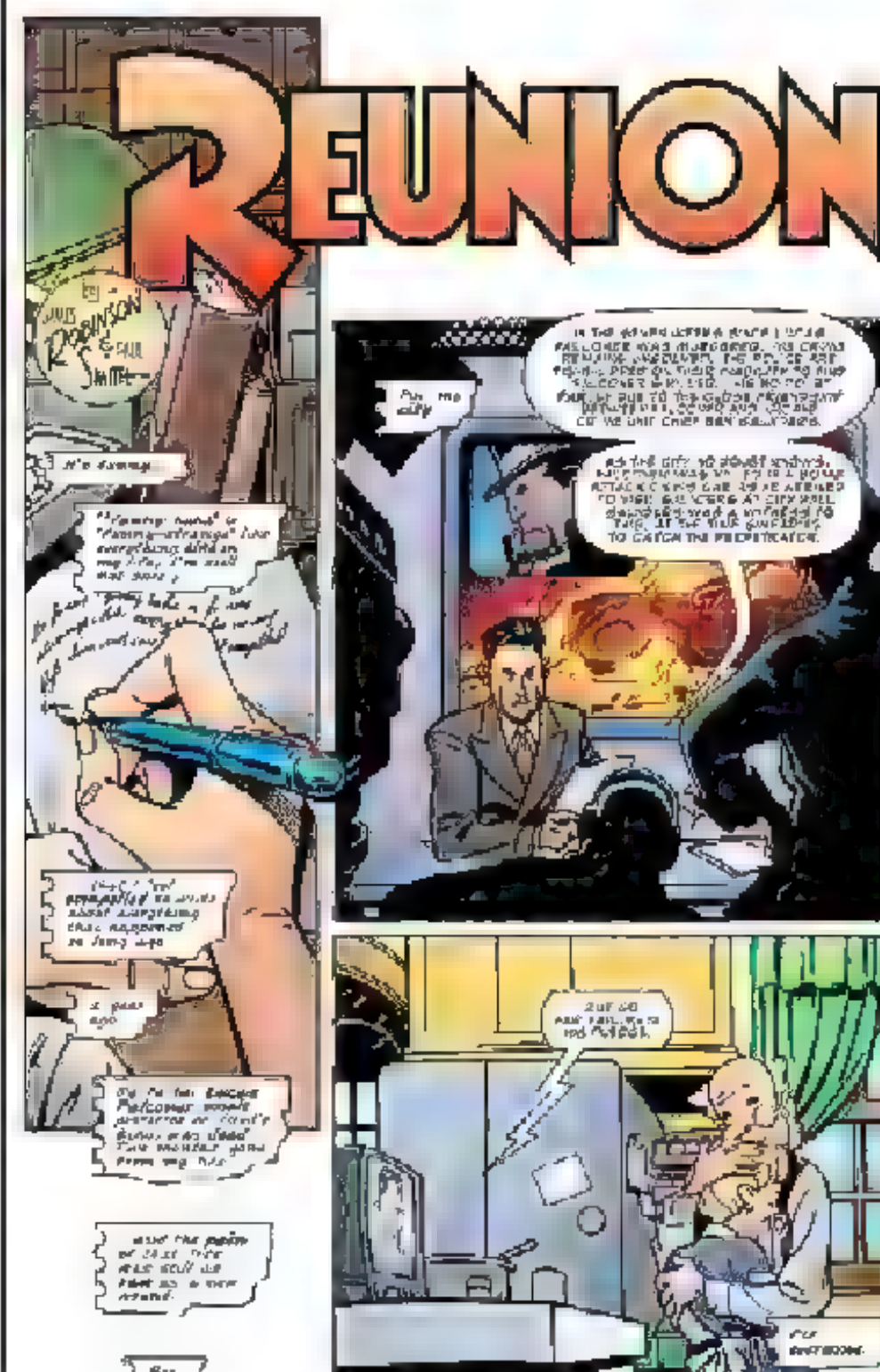
A double-sized issue provides Robinson and Smith with an extra few pages with which to ease us - and, hopefully, new readers - into the world of Devil's Echo: as well as that there is a three page prologue, two guest pin-ups (by Barry Windsor-Smith and Mike Weirigo), an eight-page Rogue's Gallery and three pages of storyboards for the never-published original version of this issue.

Plus you get a cracking story where all previous plotlines are neatly tied into a new, ongoing mystery with new villains joining the old and, finally, we get to see Chance accepted into her role as new

protector of Devil's Echo.

It's all been well worth the wait, frankly.

The Verdict: Superbly resolving the story for existing readers, bringing new readers up to speed masterfully, hooking all of us into a new plot without a pause for breath: this shows how much Robinson's singular talents have been missed since the end of Starman. (AC)



Master of Kung Fu #4

By Doug Moench, Paul Gulacy
and Jimmy Palmiotti
Marvel MAX

Be careful what you wish for. For those of us of a certain age, a revived MOKF with Moench and Gulacy - the definitive team on the original run - was the stuff of dreams. We should have been warned by M&G's SCISpy series over at Vertigo, though: the things that were fabulous and ground-breaking in the '70s have become awfully old hat today. So we have another Fu Manchu story, with terribly creaky dialogue where everybody explains everything to everybody else at every opportunity. Worse, it seems Paul Gulacy has forgotten how to draw, but to be charitable we can blame Jimmy Palmiotti. It's what he's there for. What's most vexing is the enormous Parental Advisory Explicit Content label on the cover, the largest word of which is an enormous blue 'EXPLICIT'. Why not cut to the chase? Just run a cover line saying "Leiko's costume's so tight you can see her nipples, kids! And somebody says 'Fuck'!" The Verdict: This is supposedly an example of a mature comics line. I despair, honestly I do. (MS)

Private Beach #6

By David Hahn
Save Labor

Oh... Now this is a little awkward. You see, I bought a copy of issue #5 in a bargain bin, but I didn't review it as issue #6 was already out. But I liked enough of what I read to buy issue #6 and now I come to review it I'm a little stuck.

Private Beach #5 had one of those round robin stories where one character's little story segues into another's and they eventually get to a final character whose story links back up with the first one. It was a brilliant exercise in character study, providing snippets of information, just enough to intrigue and satisfy the reader before whisking you on to the next.

This issue is completely wonky. Trudy Honeyvan - I'm guessing she's the main character - breaks open an eightball, has a sort of epiphany and then goes

shopping with her friend Sharona. Some of the incidental characters are reminiscent of those in Daniel Clowes' Eightball, the dialogue is honestly written and funny and the artwork is wonderfully crafted. But it reads like an Alan Moore-scripted episode of *Seinfeld*.

Although, now I read that back to myself, that doesn't sound like a bad thing. The Verdict: I liked this issue as much as I liked the previous one, but for different reasons. I'm still not sure what Private Beach is about, though we could have said that about *The Maxx*, couldn't we? (AC)



The Punisher #19

By Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon
Marvel

It took Ron Zimmerman's notoriously rotten "Punisher versus Al Capone" story, plus Tom Peyer's nearly as dreadful "Taxi Wars" saga, to make me realise just how much I missed Ennis's take on Frank Castle. Thankfully, the Irish scribe's hiatus, early in 2002, was a brief one and he's since returned to the title in pleasingly fine fettle. In fact, this issue is probably the best since it re-launched as an ongoing title a year and a half ago (and, yeah, that even includes the recent truly deranged two-parter featuring Wolverine).

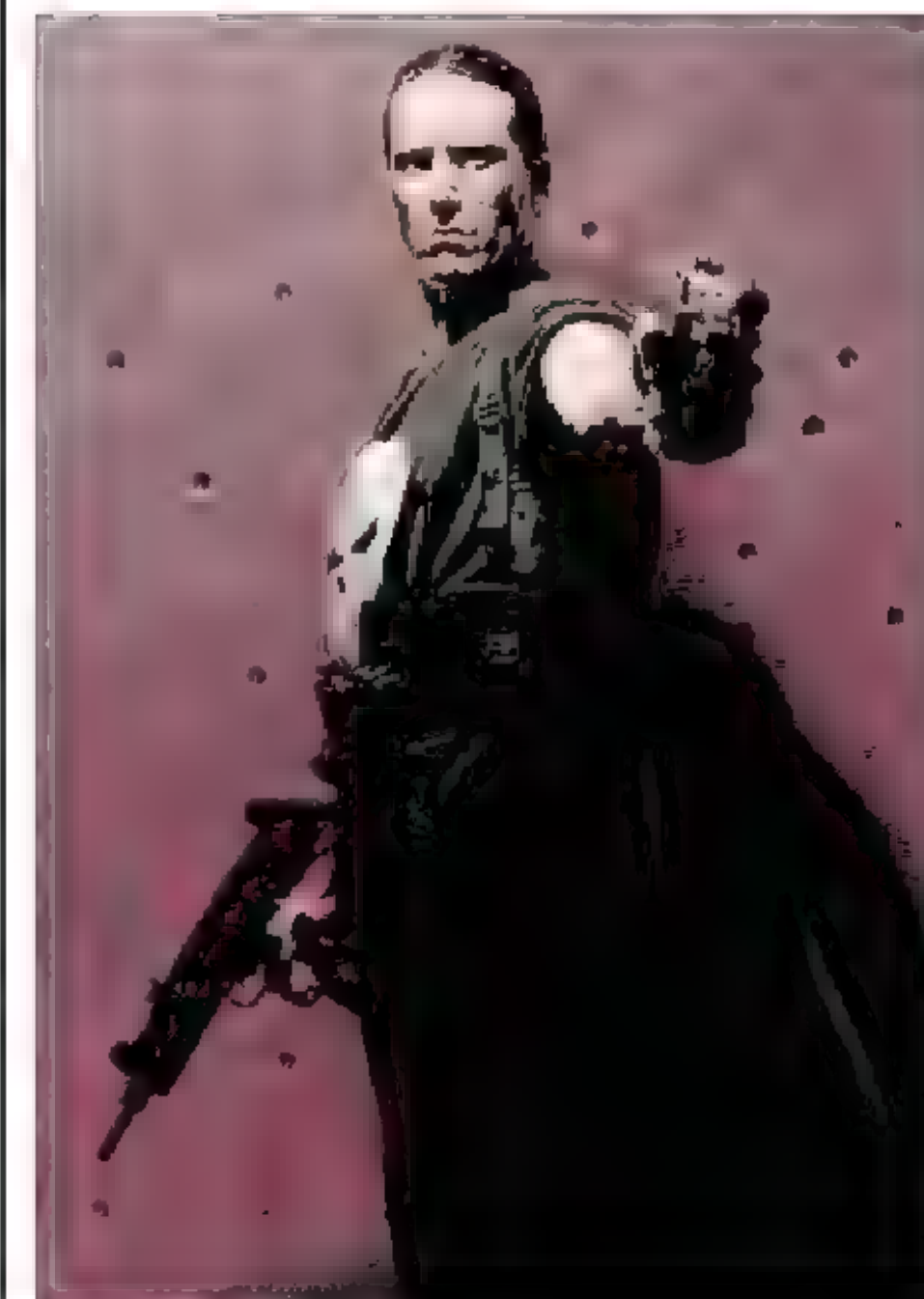
Of Mice And Men sees The Punisher reunited with Joan The Mouse, one of the long lost characters from 2000's endlessly entertaining maxiseries. Castle needs the timid but tirelessly devoted young woman's help when he's badly wounded while trying to break up a major drug ring. Recuperating at Joan's

house in the woods, it isn't long before a crew of gun-toting nasties come a calling to finish him off, which is precisely the point at which proceedings get gloriously, gratuitously violent and laugh-out-loud funny. Okay, so Ennis's Punisher is a one-joke book - Castle deadpan and cumudgeonly while death, destruction and lowbrow comedy rage all around him - but who cares when the gag is a good one and seems to get better with repetition. It's also true to say that Ennis's penchant for black humour and *grand guignol* often detract from his undoubted ability as a storyteller. His dialogue is excellent yet used far more sparingly than you'd imagine, his pacing perfect and his one liners and comic timing better than those of anyone else currently working in mainstream comics.

One of the things I enjoy most about Steve Dillon's art is his facility with facial expressions and he's on good form here, particularly in a hilarious scene where Joan's stalwart but clearly sociopathic little dog (also named Frank, wouldn't you know it?) gets the better of an enormous, snarling

Doberman called Stalin. Visual humour at its absolute best.

The Verdict: There's a feeling that Ennis might well be treading water on this title until work begins on his much-anticipated follow-up to *Preacher*, but when his stories are this much fun it's easy to forgive him. (AW)



Savage Dragon #102

By Erik Larsen
Image

I've found quite a few comics in 2002 to be offensive, but this one well and truly takes the biscuit.

In a nutshell - the Savage Dragon is doing a sort of *Sliders* cum cross-time caper. Basically, wherever he lands it sure ain't *our* Kansas. This issue he has been reunited with long dead characters from his past, while the back-up strip, about an alternate dimensional Savage Dragon offspring, neatly segues into the main story... and that's about as much as goes in the plaudit column.

The main antagonist is Mother Mayhem, who, it should be noted quite clearly, is the most ludicrously offensive and downright vile character that Larsen, a known twat, has ever created. Obviously alien, and possibly decomposing, Mother's main weapons are three babies, hanging from five metre long umbilical cords, which she throws at people. Believe it or not, but this is Larsen's tribute to *<shakes head in amazement>* the Silver Surfer. Because Mother Mayhem is obviously the herald for a Galactus-type character who turns up at the end of both stories, thereby providing that neat segue I spoke of. Actually, while Galactus-type is a good description, it's actually just a plain rip-off of one of Kirby's later God-like creations, the Celestials.

Larsen for all his many, many shortcomings isn't actually the worst comics creator on anyone's books, yet he tries so desperately to attain the status of wankiest wanker in comics. I can actually imagine him sitting, Beavis and Butt-head-like, at his drawing board and having a damned good chuckle at all the offence he causes.

Apparently, so I'm told, his house was destroyed in a hurricane a few years ago. Why wasn't he in it at the time?

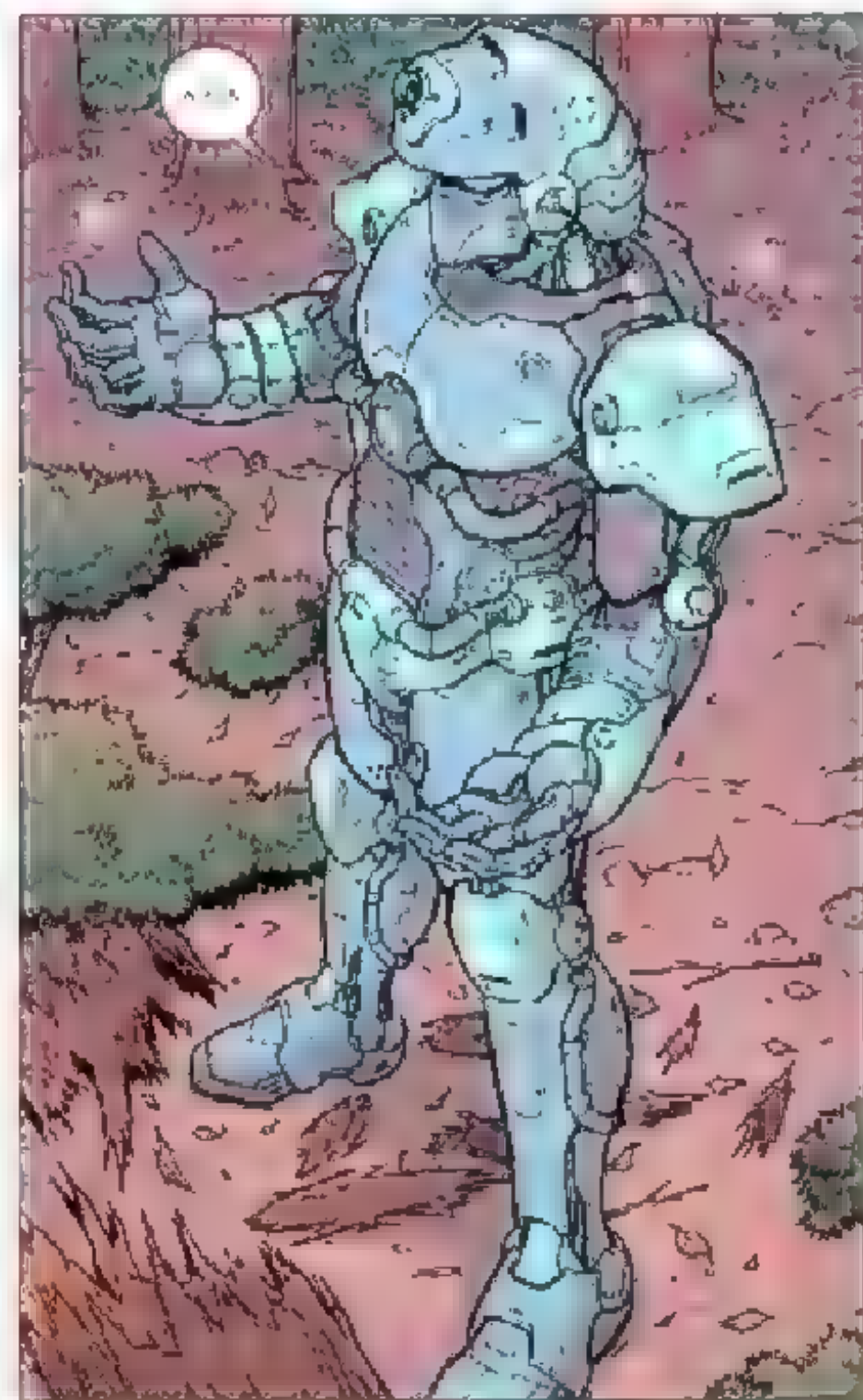
The Verdict: Burn it, shoot it and defile it, then piss on it. Bury it in the ground for a month, dig it up, rip it up, piss on it again, then send it to Larsen with some dogshit and a card telling him what an asshole he is. (DRB)

Tech Jacket #1 & 2 Robert Kirkman & C. J. Su Image

Behind the dull title ever for a comic book lies one of the *best* comics of 2002. This is not only an interesting idea; it's exactly what you would do in the same situation. It's what all of us would do faced with the dilemma/situation faced by young Zack in the opening two issues of this new Image series.

In fact, why aren't all modern superhero comics like this?

Our hero, Zack, accidentally gets bonded to an alien battlesuit that appears to make him almost invincible. The reactions in the story are what make it work so well. If you were 15 and this happened to you, you'd possibly tell your dad, especially if you have a good relationship with him. Zack's old man's reaction is as you'd expect from a 40-something father - he's as excited about it as his son. He obviously read comics when he was a kid.



The whole thing reminded me of a sort of 21st Century Spider-Man cum Iron Man and was an inspiring and refreshing read. But... there's always a but. Except this time it doesn't really detract from the good work of Kirkman and Su. This is one of those American manga-styled comics (opens can of worms, retreats to safe distance, sticks fingers in ears...) and we all know how dreadful and full of hot air they appear to be. However, this *doesn't* fit that usual Ameri-manga criterion, mainly because the artwork is excellent and conveys the story very well. C. J. Su reminds me of a manga Geof Darrow.

I'm really looking forward to the third issue, despite the awful title and that predisposition I have regarding manga artwork.

The Verdict: Yet another comic that reads like a well thought-out screenplay adaptation - surely the way for all comics to go. I cannot recommend this too highly - enjoy. (DRB)



2000 AD #2003

By various
Rebellion

It has been a funny old year for "the Galaxy's Greatest Comic". On the one hand, 2002 marked Tharg and co.'s 25th anniversary - cue much popping of corks and slapping of backs - on the other, the much hyped "Summer Offensive" (the return of old favourites *Rogue Trooper*, *Strontium Dog* and *The V.C.s*) fell rather flat and it was only with the introduction of brand new strips later in the year - *Asylum* and *Red Seas* - that matters improved. It should probably come as no surprise then that this - a 100-page, perfect-bound, end-of-year special - is a similarly mixed bag.

Greg Staples and Graham Rolfe's terrific Tharg cover gets proceedings off to a fine start, although the absence of any cover lines to attract casual buyers is both odd and somewhat self defeating, especially when you consider that the prog's main story features the long-awaited crossover between Judge Dredd and those pesky chest-bursting, acid-blooded Aliens. I'll happily risk a Rigellian Hotshot to point out that "old green genes" and his editorial droids fumbled the ball on this one.

The first real highlight arrives with a new *Sáine* strip courtesy of Pat Mills and Clint Langley. Mills is a master storyteller and he adroitly sucks the reader straight into the action here without recourse to lengthy exposition or contrived set-up. You know where the series is headed within three pages and then it's heads down, no nonsense blood-letting from there on in. Langley's painted art, meanwhile, manages to be both beautiful and disturbing at the same time - dark, evocative and blissfully chilling. Great stuff.

Caballistics, Inc., a brand new strip from Gordon Rennie and Dom Reardon, also gets off to a pleasing start. In its own way Reardon's black and white art is as effective as Langley's at communicating menace, and that, coupled with Rennie's intriguing Frightening Curves-meets-Hellboy premise, all adds up to a thrilling first instalment. Or maybe I'm just a sucker for stories set in the grimy semi-darkness of the London Underground.

Elsewhere, *Banzai Battalion*, by John Wagner and Ian Gibson, provides a much-needed injection of humour (is it just me or is "Twoth" nowhere near as funny as it used to be?). *The V.C.s* is gratifyingly action-packed and *Nikolai Dante* truly intriguing (his mother treated him like *that*?!). In fact, apart from a typically dreary *Rogue Trooper* tale, the only other major criticism involves the amount of filler included in the issue. Of 100 pages, 28 of them are taken up with pin-ups, spurious features (12 pages on 2000AD's best covers alone) and Coming Soon ads. Sorry, Rebellion, but if you're expecting people to cough up £3.95 in future, they're unlikely to take kindly to almost a third of the comic's pages being wasted on glorified advertisements and lengthy, unnecessary treks through 2000AD's history.

The Verdict: The good comfortably outweighs the bad, but there still isn't quite enough "bang for your buck" here. (AW)

Transformers: The War Within #2 & #3

By Smon Furman and Don Figuero

DreamWave

The art here is gorgeous, and the pre-crashing-on-Earth-in-1984 character designs are inspired. The writing is similarly strong, with Furman effortlessly adding depth to both the history and personalities of the familiar characters whilst still keeping them recognisable. If there is a flaw to this series, it is that the art, nice as it is, suffers occasionally from some confused storytelling. The Verdict: The best Transformers series since the Marvel UK glory days. (KG)

Truth: Red, White and Black 1

By Robert Morales and Kyle Baker

Marvel

The package is very slick, with a nicely designed cover and attractive art throughout by Kyle Baker. His style has the scratchy look of newspaper cartoons and suits the story surprisingly well, while Robert Morales' writing is sensitive and lifelike, conveying the personalities of the various characters very well, given the three-way narrative, in a small amount of space.

The important thing about this comic, though, is not the writing or the art, but the subject. On the plus side, it is a far better treatment of racism and bigotry than the over-the-top Sentinel shenanigans of the regular Marvel Universe, by virtue of being true to life. However, while there is something to be said for the position that it is the duty of storytellers to remind us of Afro-American inequality, or the Holocaust, and so on, this particular treatment doesn't engage me on the moral level – because I've seen other, better treatments of race relations elsewhere. Perhaps when this is placed in the context of the Marvel Universe in future issues, it will seem stronger; but at the moment it's something of a weak cousin to other treatments of the subject. As such, it is hard to avoid the cynical view that this is merely a publicity stunt for a touchy-feely Marvel, morally outraged as long as it brings the money in... The Verdict: It's a very well produced comic and can be enjoyed on that level, but that seems to belittle the serious points being made. On the other hand, those same points are not being made well enough to make this worthwhile on an intellectual-moral level. (KG)

Ultimate War #1

By Mark Millar and Chris Bachalo

Marvel

The Ultimates vs. the X-Men – there you go, that's your story summary. The artwork by Bachalo is slick and sexy, with many panels that are a feast for the eyes and the pinnacle of modern superhero comic design and execution. On the other hand this is Chris "Steampunk" Bachalo, so the caveat here is that there will also be many panels where the story will just lurch to a screaming halt while your brain asks your eyes just what the hell is happening and your eyes blink and refuse to comprehend just what exactly the densely inked close-up is supposed to be a densely inked close-up of. There's one panel where it took me about a minute to realise Spider-Man was in it... The Verdict: At the moment, this reads like a Bruce Willis action movie. It could read like a Steven Seagal action movie, so we should be grateful. (AC)

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen Vol. 2 #4

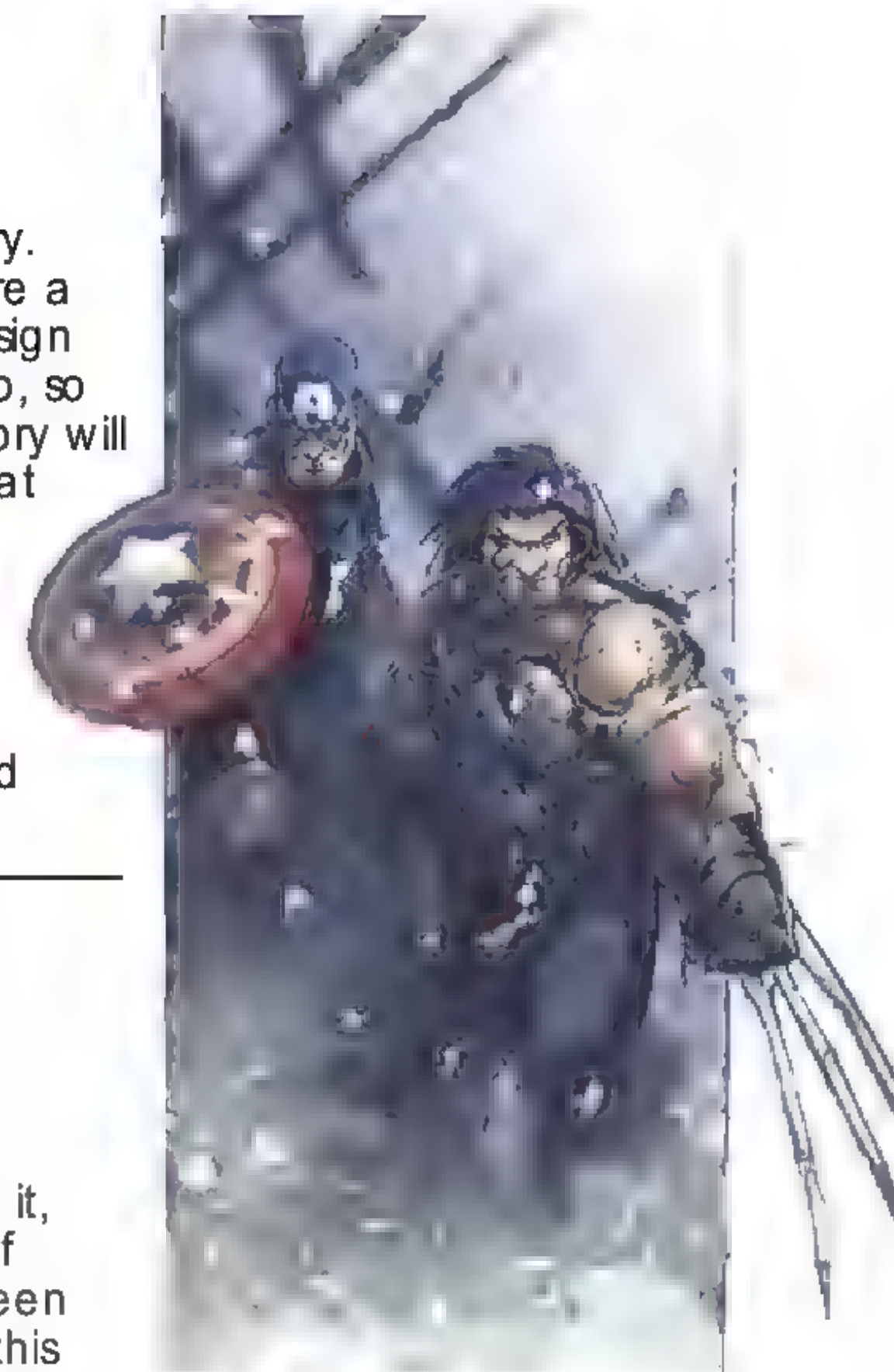
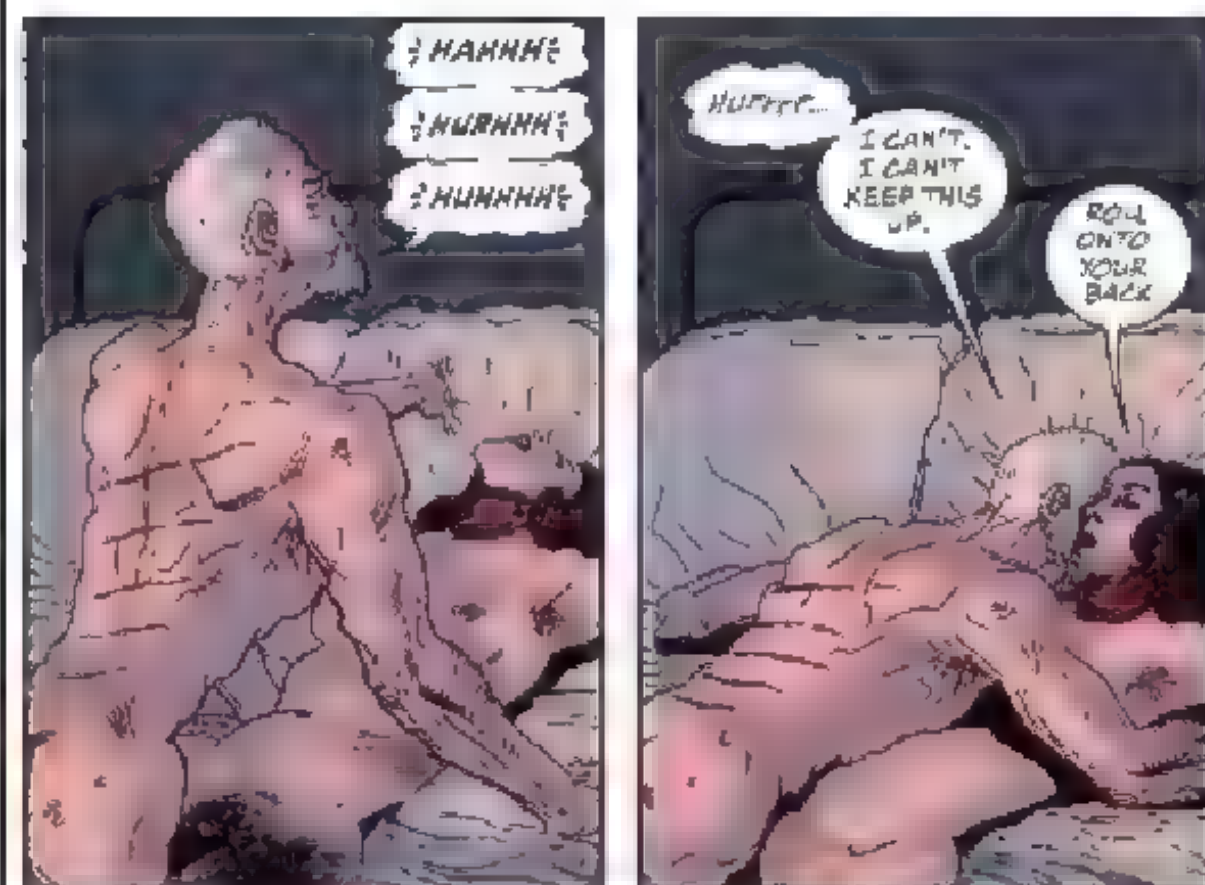
By Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill

DC/Wildstorm

I'm not seeing sex everywhere in comics this month, really I'm not. I imagine I wasn't the only reader to be surprised when the, let's face it, climactic scene to this issue turned out to be a softcore depiction of Allan and Mina making the beast with two backs... Those who've been reading the prose material in each issue closely already knew that this was due to happen to those two characters at some point, but did anyone expect it to turn up in the comic itself? And especially coming right after the issue in which Mina was raped by Griffin? In that context it's all part of the psychological depth with which Moore is investing his mythical cast this time around - and fairly disturbing psychology it is too.

In other respects this issue is basically an interlude where nothing much happens, which seems an odd thing to put into what is only a six part story. Everyone is girding up for a big battle with the Martians, Allan and Mina are, for some reason, searching for Dr. Moreau, and that's about it. It's all beautifully paced, as is to be expected, and O'Neill's artwork continues to look as marvellous as it has done throughout this second series, much more warm and sensual than it's ever been before. But what has up to now been a fast, furious and action packed story seems to have abruptly taken a long pause for breath - and to be honest it feels unsatisfying.

As good as the art is, though, the real treat in this volume is the prose almanac of occult locations worldwide. The pleasure it gives is, admittedly, probably akin to that enjoyed by trainspotters: the wealth of allusions to all kinds of popular fiction Moore has drawn together here is almost overwhelming. But if future volumes consisted only of illustrated prose, I for one wouldn't mind! After all, it would still be a comic... The Verdict: An interlude, and a sex scene; not what anyone might have expected, but still well up to standard. (MK)



Fables trade paperback

By Bill Willingham, Lan Medina and Steve Leialoha

Midnight, Mass. 1-8

By John Rozum, Jesús Saiz and Jimmy Palmiotti

DC/Vertigo

WHEN I first started collecting comicbooks there were two kinds of horror comics; the bad ones and anything Bernie Wrightson was involved in. Therefore a few issues of House of Mystery, House of Secrets etc. and the first ten issues of Swamp Thing was about where horror comics started and finished, for me at least.

But that is a huge generalisation. In the early 1970s there was a renaissance of horror comics. Not since the heady days of EC had there been a true return to horror – as opposed to SF disguised as horror, as in many of the Lee, Kirby and Ditko pre-hero Marvel comics [because the Comics Code he say “no”, that’s why! – Production Ed.]. DC were recruiting a lot of Philippine and Central American artists and using them on a host of new horror comics; the Underground movement was moving away from sex and drugs and dabbling in post-ironic horror; the black and white magazine format was embraced by Marvel but they were beaten to it by Warren, Skywald, etc. There was some cutting edge stuff, but a lot more cheesy horror floating about.

Then it went quiet and until Vertigo appeared horror wasn’t really anything to get excited about – film and television did it better anyhow. DC was at the forefront of the horror comics revival in the ’70s and it was there again in the late 1980s. Now the buzz word was “post-modern” and horror became more eclectic, less... horrible. In fact horror became metaphysical and there wasn’t a comic that came out in the 1980s that was genuinely chilling. The same can be said about Vertigo’s latest foray into “nu horror”, except that thanks to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* it’s now hard to be genuinely scary without having to throw some kind of humour in for good measure.

Fables isn’t a horror comic, though if it had been produced in the 1970s there wouldn’t have been a specific pigeon-hole in which to place it, so it would have been lumped in there with *Weird Western Tales* and *Strange Sports Stories*. It is not

dissimilar to Bill Willingham’s superb, but ill-fated, *Coventry* series, in that he takes a lot of mythical creatures – this time the folk from fairy tales and, well, fables – and mixes them into our own universe. Jack the Giant Killer, Beauty and the Beast, Snow White, the Big Bad Wolf all exist in our world, and they have successfully blended in with the rest of humanity – or the Mundanes, as the Fable-folk call us. However, the first story arc – a tale of

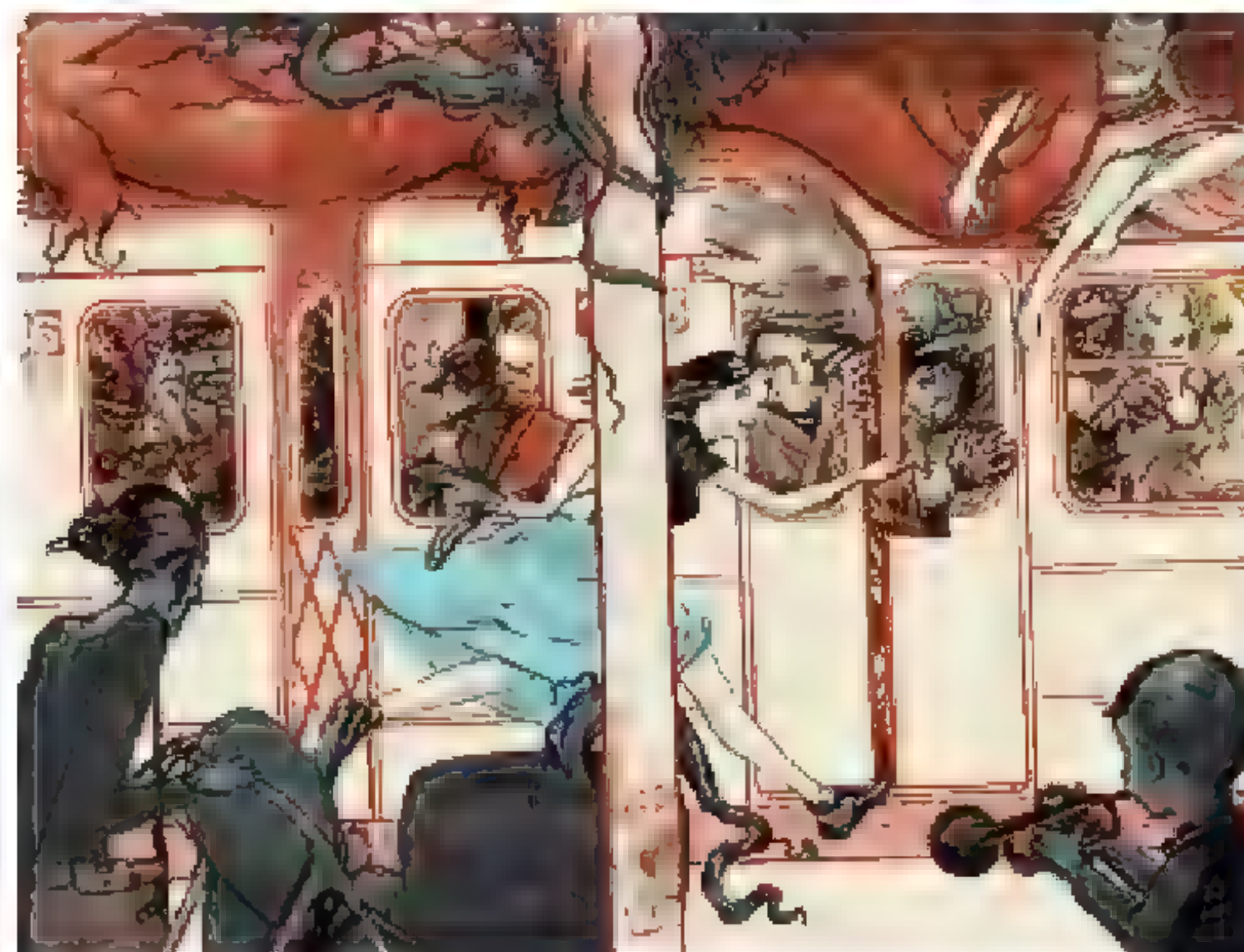
deceit, murder, secrets and double crosses – is packed full of things that wouldn’t look out of place in a horror story. Pints of spilled blood, monsters, ambiguous characters and a pacing not too different from a standard spine-chiller mean, to me, that this began as a horror comic, cleverly packaged.

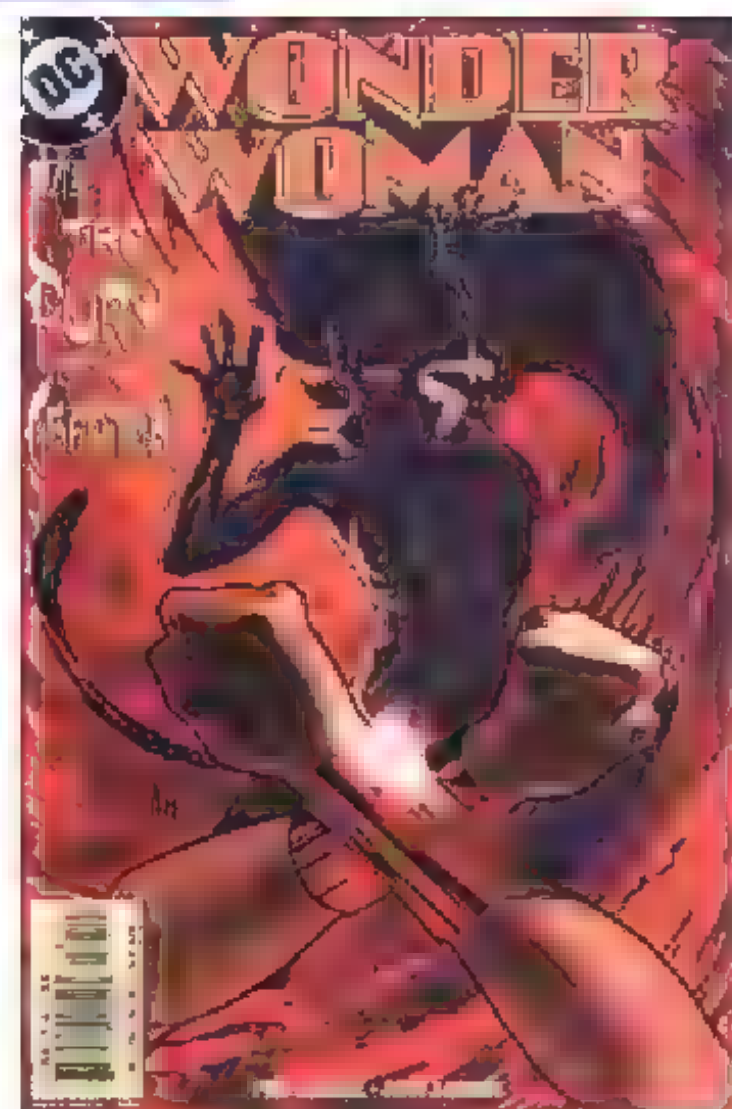
Midnight, Mass. is most definitely a horror comic, but one rooted firmly in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* mould. It’s full of ironic dialogue, two cool yet ultimately tedious lead characters and an assurance about it that surprised me. It’s the *X-Files* meets *Angel* with a bit of *The Thin Man* thrown in for good measure. Julia and Adam Kadmon are supernatural investigators who have been doing it so long they’re quite blasé about the whole thing. They have just taken on a new assistant, Jenny, who has a secret – hopefully an interesting one, because it isn’t mentioned again after the first part – and is, of course, the most likeable character so far introduced. The monsters seen in the opening storyline are, on the whole, interesting and slightly different from your standard zombie-vampire-werewolf fare we were fed back in the old days of horror comics. Plus, *Midnight, Mass.* seems to be using some of the concepts that Bill Willingham is trying to use in *Fables*. There are references to a multi-cultural world of horror and magic that hasn’t been touched on before by comics writers.

On the whole, would you agree that it appears that I liked them? Well... I did, but I can also see a lot of problems with both of them. *Fables’* first story arc had a plot so wafer thin that I’d guessed 90% of it by the third (of five) part of the story. I don’t think that’s particularly good, especially as this first story arc is designed to draw people in. It could be that Willingham was interested in introducing his cast rather than worrying about the story; but if that was the case then it’s incredibly lazy writing for a professional. The story also suffered from poor artwork from Lan Medina. “Competent” is the best compliment I can pay the man. I realise that they’re trying to achieve a very European feel and look about this comic, but even if Medina is European that’s no excuse for him not being that good. Yet, despite the unsatisfying artwork and a plot that left a lot to be desired I still found it an interesting read. You expect to cringe more than I did when you find characters from your favourite fairy tales or rhymes being lampooned or modernised, and the humour was up to Willingham’s high standard even if the overall plot wasn’t.

Midnight, Mass. was written as though Rozum anticipated who his audience was going to be. It has a confidence about it that I like, yet the artist, Saiz, is not, in my opinion, suited to be drawing it and that takes away some of the power it holds. I just feel there are artists out there who could really capture the atmosphere that is being conjured up by the writer. I also think that Joe Average would find this harder to get into than *Fables* – mainly because there is less to generally identify with in *Midnight, Mass.*

The Verdict: I feel, from an objective position, that both titles have merits and both are entertaining, with enough plot introduction to make me want to come back and read more. But they both have aspects which come across as faults even though they may not have been intended to. For the monthly comics miniseries, and ultimately the trade paperbacks to succeed, some issues have to be addressed by affirmative editorial action. (DRB)





THESE three items between them virtually add up to a potted history of one of DC's three flagship characters, the only ones to have been constantly published ever since they were launched more than sixty years ago. They also underline one unavoidable truth: while both Superman and Batman have gone through phases of excellence, ever since her creator William Moulton Marston died in 1947 Wonder Woman has remained the character that no-one's been quite sure what to do with.

The 80 Page Giant - not a reprint of a 1960s collection but the latest in an occasional series of imitations of a 1960s format - starts with what is believed to have been Marston's final Wonder Woman script, written as he was dying. The thirty-nine page *Villainy, Incorporated* is densely

plotted enough to fill perhaps six months' worth of modern superhero stories (as Phil Jimenez demonstrated by devoting six issues to a far less plot-heavy sequel during 2002), so not surprisingly it's an exercise in fast-paced action in which eight of the heroine's enemies team up and have to be defeated, in three quite distinct main plots and sub-plots. Is it any good? Modern readers may hate the completely cardboard characters and Harry Peter's very ornate, thick-lined art (not served well here by too dark a colouring job), and may also find the constant binding of characters in ropes and chains a bit weird! Marston's point was always that the characters were bound so that they could break their bonds, as a symbol of strength and self-reliance, but several generations of fans, as well as Fredric Wertham, have considered it sick stuff. I rather enjoy the vitality of those 1940s stories and I very much like Peter's art - but whether that makes them "good" in any objective sense is

another matter.

Much the same applies to the three late 1950s/early 1960s stories by Kanigher, Andru and Esposito which fill up the rest of this *faux* annual. By that time the comic was being pitched primarily at very young female readers: in that pre-feminist era Kanigher played up the romance between WW and boyfriend Steve Trevor, and otherwise concentrated on impact

and excitement, usually at the expense of narrative intelligibility, sense or even basic scientific principles. The title alone of *The Eagle of Space* may give you the idea, especially when you learn that the "eagle" is actually a dinosaur... Ross Andru's minimal, fine-lined artwork looks gorgeous in this reprint, but that won't be enough to prevent the modern reader from regarding these three Silver Age

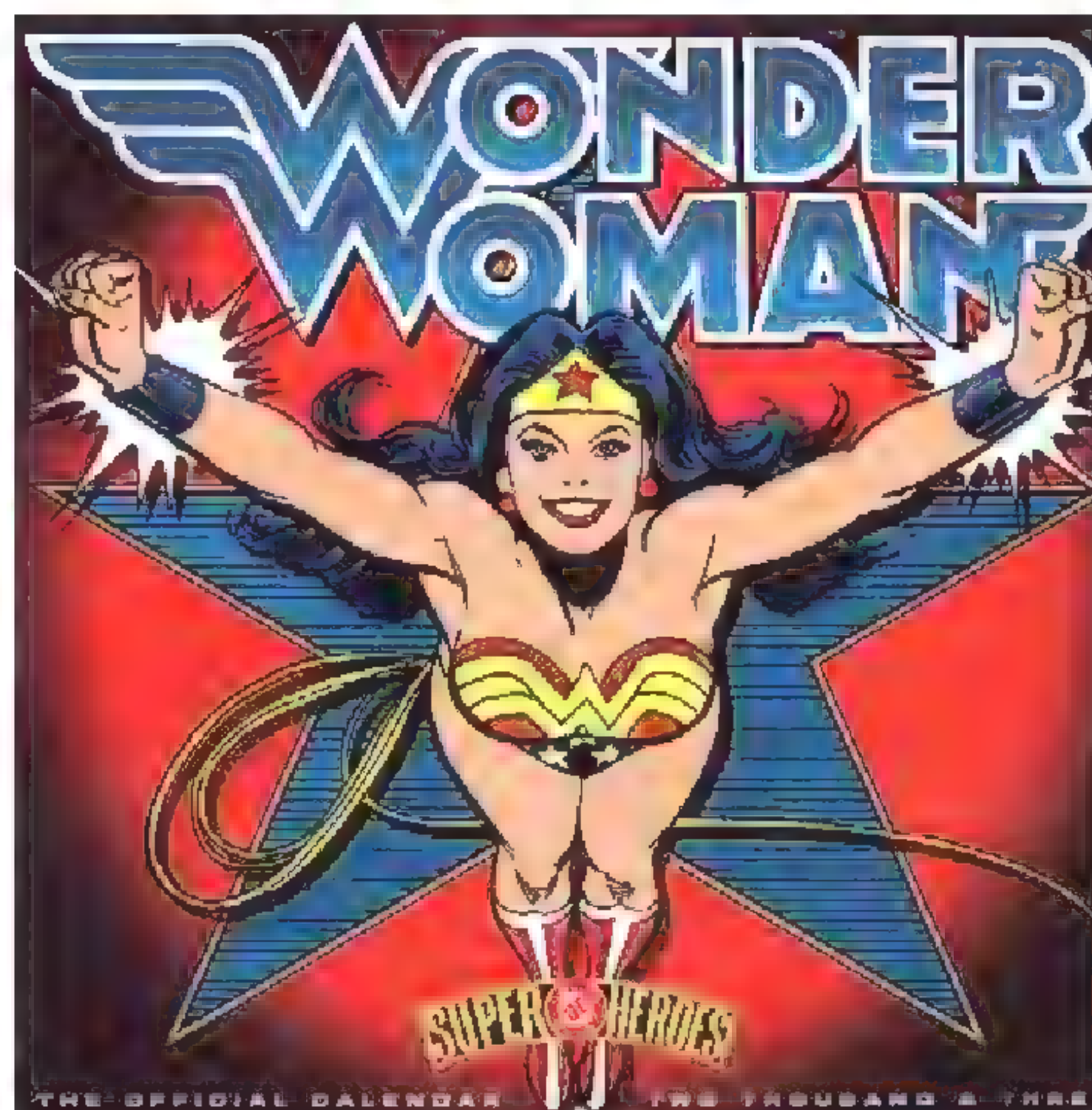
stories as utter rubbish. Or are they good examples of comics from a more innocent, non-Marvel-inflected age, when characterisation and continuity meant nothing, while well-paced, wildly imaginative action designed to make the eyes of young readers widen in amazement was the whole point of superhero comics? You decide.

In the present day different standards definitely apply; and Phil Jimenez' current version of Wonder Woman has been largely failing to meet them. If ever there was a demonstration of why *not* to allow a "hot" artist with no writing track record to write a monthly series, this series for the last couple of years has been it. Jimenez has the story ideas, and the grasp on principles of continuity and characterisation that is mandatory these days, but he has zero idea of how to pace a story effectively. Either he devotes too many issues to too slim a plot, or he crams far too much into too few issues, with never a sign of a decent middle ground.



WW #187 is part two of one of the "too much in too little space" variety: it's almost as chaotic as anything Kanigher ever wrote, but, over-stuffed with continuity references and bursting at the seams with character, it's too busy making sense to be comprehensible. Jimenez has badly needed an editor to kick his work into shape: at least his heavily George Perez-influenced art has evolved from flash and incoherence to good narrative page layouts during this run, but his storytelling skills have made reading Wonder Woman deeply frustrating - and probably flat out impossible for anyone other than the dedicated fan.

So perhaps it's no surprise that the latest Wonder Woman Calendar has absolutely nothing to do with the current version of the heroine. The American version consists



of panels, cover segments and montages from the 1940s to the 1960s; the European one I got for Christmas has twelve pages of poses which appear to be based on 1970s/1980s Dick Giordano covers and panels. It even uses an old series logo from around 1982. Both versions indicate ever so clearly the rift between the current marketing of superhero comics to a tiny, obsessive audience and the merchandising of superheroes as icons to the public at large: both will probably have sold in larger quantities than any Wonder Woman issues in recent memory, because with their flat colouring and resolutely old fashioned art styles they represent what the general public believes the heroine to be. Above all, they presumably represent the fact that *someone* in DC's licensing department *knows* that that's what the public thinks. Maybe it'd be an idea if they passed that little secret on to the people in editorial? If the comics matched up to public perceptions, DC might even end up with a genuine best-selling comic on their hands, not just an occasional "fan favourite". The Verdict: "Quality" modern comics for the few, or exciting nonsense for the many? Wonder Woman sums up the dilemma of the US mainstream. (MK)

THE COLLECTED VERDICT

TRADE PAPERBACK & GRAPHIC NOVEL REVIEWS



The Authority: Earth Inferno
By Mark Millar, Frank Quitely and Chris Weston
Wildstorm/DC

These are the first Authority stories I've read, and now I'm wondering what all the fuss has been about for the last few years. No, don't all write in telling me that these are by Mark Millar so I should go back and read the ones by Warren Ellis because they're better - I've heard all that already. It isn't the writer I'm wondering about, it's the fact that so many people seemed to be talking about how incredibly revolutionary this comic was *conceptually* that puzzles me, since there isn't anything in the concept that hasn't been done a thousand times before. And I assume that Millar, as is his wont, is following the overall concept that was in place when he took over, while injecting a few extra shock tactics. So, this is The Authority, even if it isn't "the good one by Ellis", right?

And here's the recipe. Take a helping of the Watchmen "people who dress up in costumes to fight crime are probably sociopaths" formula, mix in a good dose of the Post-Claremont Syndrome - defined as "the inner lives and thoughts of the characters are more important than the actions they're involved in" - but exchange the verbosity for short, snappy dialogue bytes instead. Finally, turn up the heat a lot, cook until overdone, and, voila - you have The Authority! Same as the Fox/Sekowsky JLA, but louder and more meaningful! Just like The Avengers, with less wisecracks and more angst!

But then, perhaps the only way to make a superhero comic "revolutionary" is to mix, match and impress everyone by how "hot" you can make it. If so, I'll leave that sort of thing to those who care enough to get excited by it.

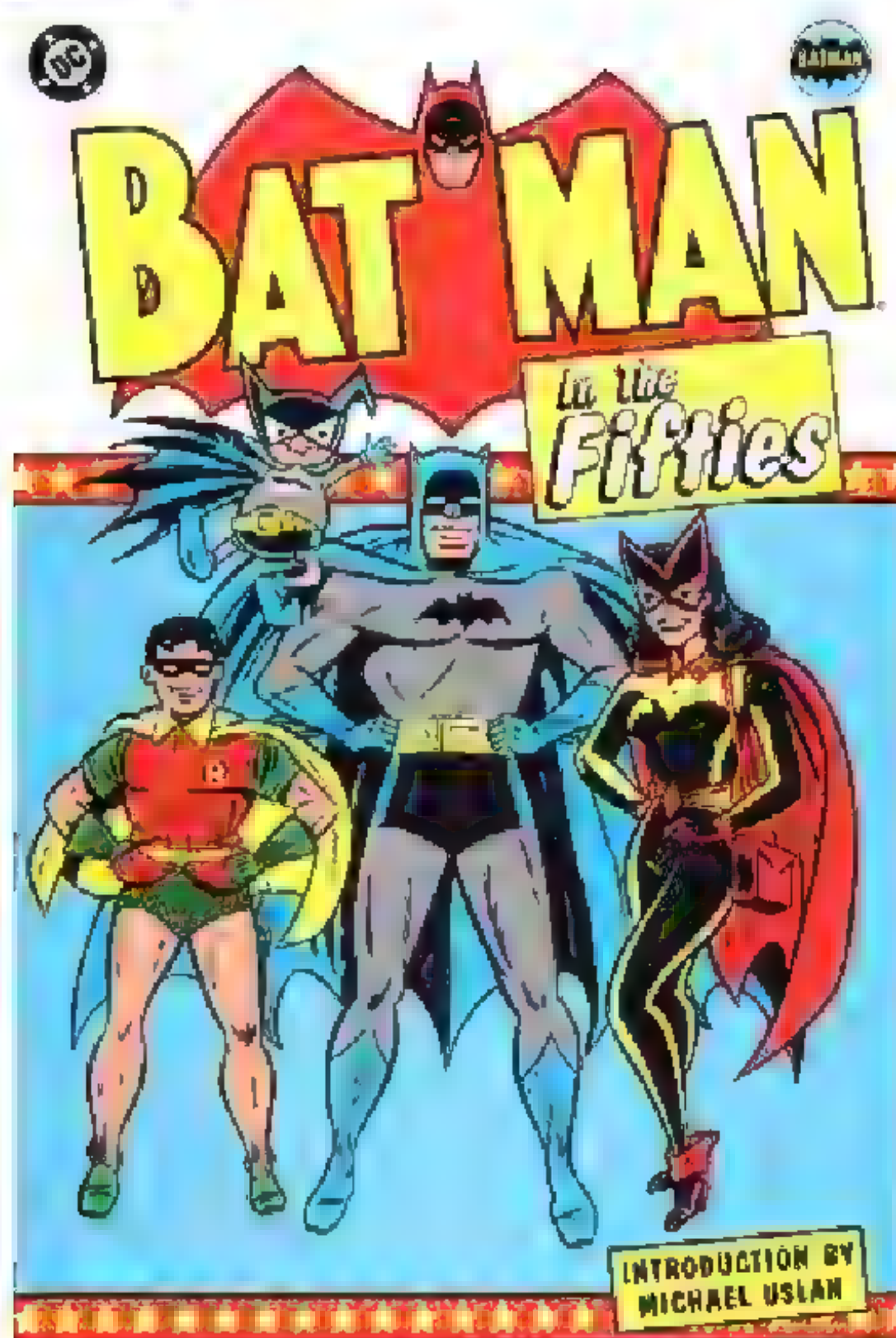
The Verdict: Move along, there's nothing to see here. (MK)

Batman - Bruce Wayne: Murderer
By Rucka, Brubaker, Dixon, Grayson, Puckett, McDaniel
& Burchett; DC Comics

DC are starting to get the hang of how best to collect these multi-title (and more significantly, multi-writer) epics - and as a result, Bruce Wayne: Murderer is a hell of a lot tighter, more readable and inexpensive than it was in monthly format. This is achieved by concentrating on the important chapters and the stronger writers (Rucka and Brubaker), then choosing only what is essential from the rest (six pages from a Robin tie-in here, five from a Birds Of Prey there). As a result, we don't get dragged down (and lose story momentum) with subplots, or with unnecessary fight-scene padding (something the otherwise capable Chuck Dixon is excessively guilty of). In fact, for a super-hero collection, this is refreshingly clear of brawls, concentrating instead on the various reactions to the charges against Wayne (and if you think everyone in the Batman Family automatically cries "innocent!", think again). For the most part

this is handled well - particularly in the scenes between Nightwing and Robin, and in the compelling dilemma faced by Wayne's bodyguard (and "accomplice"), Sasha Bordeaux. It only really sags, unsurprisingly, whenever Devin Grayson takes up the baton, especially when she starts a preachy conversation on the morality of murder between Alfred and Leslie Thompkins. A little more editing would have been appreciated here - hell, I'd settle for editing Grayson out of the Batbooks completely, she just doesn't fit.

Artwise, it's pretty average - no standouts, but nobody embarrasses themselves either. Scott McDaniel has stopped trying for that curious Miller/McFarlane mix therefore his art is more relaxed. Nice to see Rick Leonardi again, even if he doesn't get much to play with. Long-time readers will lament the day they used to tell stories like this in 22 pages, and the climax won't come as much of a surprise to anybody who's been reading the Batman titles over the last few years... but if DC insist on turning their best character into a soap opera, they could do a lot worse than this. The Verdict: Judicious editing trims the fat off this crossover to leave a lean thriller that only occasionally sags with Batflab. (RH)



Batman in the Fifties By Various DC

I was really rather looking forward to this collection – so I was surprised to find it very hard going. My anticipation was based on the fact that I generally enjoy 1950s DC material: The Greatest 1950s Stories Ever Told and The Essential Showcase are firm reprint favourites, each presenting a nice mixture of top notch art and wacky stories. But when it comes to Batman... legions of Dick Sprang fans will doubtless commence baying for my blood now, but the art by Bob Kane's "ghosts", mostly Sprang, throughout this collection seems uniformly cramped, ugly, weak on narrative and given absolutely no support by a succession of corny, shallow scripts.

The fact of the matter is, DC wasn't really much of a superhero publisher at any point during the 1950s. Fan historians have insisted that the revamp of The

Flash was a vitally important turning point, but consider that it was another three years before Barry Allen got his own title, and that Julie Schwartz's "superhero revival" amounted to all of about 30 comics – that's issues, not titles – much less than 10% of DC's total output between 1956 and 1960, and you might begin to see a different picture. Schwartz hired some fine artists to work on his revamps – but the vast majority of the top talent at DC during the decade was working on war stories, romances, westerns, mystery tales, jungle yarns and in particular science fiction. The superheroes were at the bottom of the heap, and this was particularly true of the "old lags" who'd never been cancelled: the art bashed out by Harry Peter's assistants on Wonder Woman was as dull as that in this Batman collection, while Wayne Boring and others turned in decent but unspectacular jobs on the Superman titles. Superheroes have since become the be all and end all for DC (and Marvel), though – so while stacks of first rate old material in other genres remains available only in gradually decaying, highly priced original printings, we are now being treated to lavish, lovingly executed repackaging of DC's early Silver Age dregs.

On the other hand, Eddie Campbell has recently written about how much he loves the Batman stories of the 1950s, and how much they inspired him to think of all kinds of ideas and possibilities when he read them as a child. Perhaps you really did have to be there! At any rate, his comments make it clear that one person's dregs may be another's works of genius.

The Verdict: If you enjoyed these as a child, you'll love them again. If not, enter with caution; DC simply wasn't very good at doing superhero comics in the 1950s. (MK)

Daredevil: Love's Labours Lost

By Denny O'Neil, David Mazzucchelli, Frank Miller & John Buscema
Marvel

I'm not really sure who this is aimed at. The Miller fans who bought DD: Visionaries Vol. #1–3 might be persuaded by the inclusion of the one and a half Miller stories not yet collected, but they may well feel cheated on reading them. The oddball *Badlands* is a Daredevil story in name alone, a modern day Western most interesting for one of John Buscema's finest art jobs, but it's tagged on here as an afterthought to a collection of Denny O'Neil's post-Miller DD's which begins mid-story and ends with plot-threads a dangling. David Mazzucchelli fans might be excited to see his pre-*Born Again* work collected, but only occasionally does his later flair show here. O'Neil's scripts are occasionally cringe-worthy, involving clumsy attempts at politicising the Marvel Universe with IRA assassin The Gael and a group of Italian neo-fascists (and their robotic killer knight called "Sir Lancelot"!) among the bad guys. And let's not even mention the confused, hurried and hollow death of Heather Glenn.

On the plus side, there are some moments of inspired weirdness here – the bizarre Two-Gun Kid team-up that opens the book and an interesting take on the Vulture – but mostly this feels like O'Neil trying to write like Miller, and falling flat on his face. He'd have done much better to write like Denny O'Neil.

The Verdict: There are much better DD eras to collect now the Miller stuff is done. Start with the superb Ann Nocenti/John Romita Jr. run... and hurry up about it! (RH)

The Flash: Blood Will Run

By Geoff Johns, Scott Kolins, Doug Hazlewood and Jose Marzan Jr.
DC

Barring the odd misstep, The Flash has consistently been one of DC's better books and, after a shaky start, Geoff Johns is continuing that tradition. It helps that this is by far the best-looking superhero book DC have published in years thanks to the arrival of Scott Kolins, an artist who has transformed his style over the last few years from average to – well, stunning. A little Miller, a little primetime Byrne and Austin, more than a little Moebius... Kolins draws the biggest, loudest, most dramatic action sequences you're likely to see anywhere, plus great backgrounds (he's really brought Keystone City to life) and he's pretty good at character scenes too. Hell, if it wasn't for John Romita Jr., I'd be hailing him the best superhero artist in the biz at the moment. Since joining The Flash, Kolins seems to be encouraging Johns too. In the eight stories collected here, he revitalises both Wally West and his supporting cast, whilst also achieving something no post-Crisis Flash writer has yet managed, bringing the classic Barry Allen Rogue's Gallery into the 21st Century – more dangerous and more human. He successfully deals with the repercussions of Wally's past as a love 'em and leave 'em super-stud and also introduces some interesting subplots involving Keystone's police and politicians. All that and the finest cover artist in the industry (Brian Bolland, of course), here given the full-page gallery treatment he deserves. Let's hope DC keeps these new Flash collections coming (though I'm still holding out for a trade of the classic Baron/Guice era too, guys!)

The Verdict: Some of the best super-hero art you'll see – and some pretty fine stories to boot. It's a hell of a lot better than Johns' JSA! (RH)

Hellblazer: Good Intentions

By Brian Azzarello and Marcelo Frusin
Vertigo

So let's get the praise out of the way first. Marcello Frusin is a bloody great artist, one of the best to ever set pencil to John Constantine (and with Dillon, Phillips and Piers-Rayner behind him, that's saying something). He's stylish, he's shadowy, he's sexy, he draws wonderful backgrounds and he has a cinematic flow similar to that of Brian Azzarello's other great Vertigo collaborator, Eduardo Risso. Colourist James Sinclair does him plenty of favours too. No doubt about it, this is one fine-looking book. But reading it is a bit like chatting up the most beautiful girl (or boy) at the party and finding that, yeah, they look great, but there's just no-o-othing going on underneath.

Azzarello is a strong writer. His dialogue is sharp and realistic and thankfully he sidesteps the Americans' trap of filling JC's mouth with chim-chimmereys and gor blimey guvs. He has a nasty, nasty imagination that suggests he was brought up in a trailer park Marshall Mathers would have run away from, and he gives good unsettling anecdote. Unfortunately, he just doesn't know what to do with John Constantine at all. So he casts him as a spooky cross between the Phantom Stranger and Rod Serling, wandering around smalltown America observing the horror and weirdness of its people, but remaining, ultimately, unaffected. The John Constantine sitting in the 24-hour diner on page #1 is EXACTLY the same man who turns his back and walks away from a naked woman chained to a tree and a redneck mousing a dead dog on page #137. Unlike previous Hellblazer writers who have grabbed JC by the cigarette and dragged him kicking and screaming through Hell itself, Azzarello seems hesitant to do anything more than slip John a mickey and embarrass him with a bit of grubby internet bestiality. Sorry, Brian, but after everything this bloke's been through, that's a bit like trying to kill Superman with a spud gun.

The Verdict: Beautiful artwork, but very little excitement or emotional involvement. (RH)



Mad About Super Heroes By the usual gang of super-idiot Mad Books

Assuming that this is a fairly complete assemblage of Mad superhero spoofs, it appears that they haven't often bothered with the actual comicbooks that much during the last 50 years. The original Harvey Kurtzman parodies of the comicbook Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman and Plastic Man are here, and in full colour - otherwise the bulk of the collection is reprints of superhero film and TV show spoofs.

Unfortunately, Mad film and TV spoofs tend to be the least satisfying and most transient parts of the magazine. Reduced to a few static scenes plucked from each screenplay, laden with long word balloons and crammed with topical in-jokes and references, they're designed to make a point at the time and then be forgotten... which makes collecting them rather pointless, really. In these days of VHS and DVD re-releases of everything, they may offer amusement to those who've seen each film or show again recently, and who were there when they originally aired. Otherwise, most of the entertainment lies in watching Mort Drucker do the best of the thankless task of drawing these arid scripts and actor likenesses, and in savouring the all too few gag pages by Don Martin and Sergio Aragones.

The Verdict: Satire past its sell-by date. (MK)

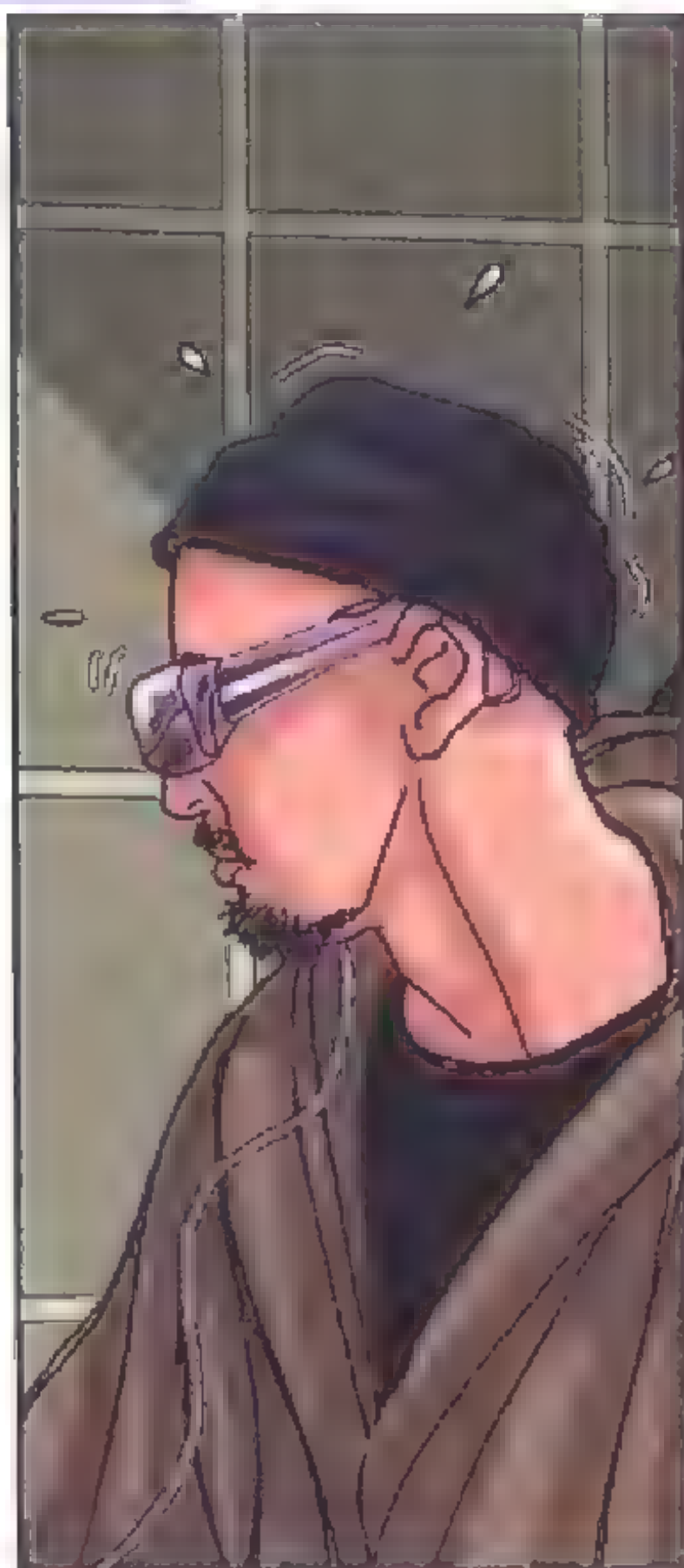


Three Fingers By Rich Koslowski Top Shelf

The story of Rickey Rat, the most famous 'toon to ever make it in Hollywood, and of his tragic "creator" Dizzy Walters. Rich Koslowski's spoof history of famous cartoon characters (altered just enough to avoid lawsuits) reveals the dark secret behind Rickey's success, and the terrible price many other 'toons paid for a taste of that success. It's a dark satire that stains the technicolour world with Hollywood sleaze, unearthing a shocking conspiracy that also involves Marilyn, JFK and Martin Luther King. Told in documentary format, the book includes interviews with aging 'toon stars like Portly Pig, Buggy Bunny and the truly grotesque Carhom Armwhistle, along with revealing photographs and video footage that shed a grim light on cartoon history. Yet despite tearing three-fingered skeletons from animated closets and ensuring you'll never watch a cartoon in exactly the same way again, Koslowski is never less than affectionate in his satire.

The Verdict: A twisted cousin of *Who Killed Roger Rabbit?*, this dark satire is recommended to both animation fans and conspiracy buffs. (RH)





Norge #3: Lucyber

By Chris Lamquet

Dargaud/Le Lombard

The big drawback to the recent trend towards album-only publication in northern Europe is that when a story extends beyond one album, you have to wait about a year to read its continuation. Perhaps that's a kind of frustration particularly felt by readers more accustomed to monthly publication schedules. I only really mention it because I enjoyed the heck out of this album, and now I want to know how the story ends!

Norge is pure cyberpunk. Alvin Norge is a red-hot former hacker turned designer, and in the first album of the series he had to deal with the consequences when his sexy computer game character Kimberley was transformed into a very invasive and deadly virus. This time Kimberley is back, altered again and now even more dangerous, controlled by a fanatical semi-religious cyber-cult poised to take over the world unless Norge can find a way to stop them...

There's nothing very original about this, nor is it as imaginative with the genre as any William Gibson novel you might care to name. What makes it enjoyable are the care and detail with which Lamquet imbues the only-just-futuristic setting, his clean lined, beautifully proportioned art, and the battery of tastefully applied, fully supportive Photoshop techniques with which he renders it. If you look at the art for its own sake it's as flashy and accomplished as anything... but you don't look at it that way, because all the flash and technique are applied to the telling of a strong, fast-moving and entertaining story. The result is both eye candy and first rate narrative; perhaps that demonstrates, yet again, the advantages that the skilful European writer/artist/colourist may have over the American system of labour division. The Verdict: It looks fantastic, it reads even better, but you might want to wait until the next part appears, hopefully some time this year. (MK)

Where Hats Go

By Kurt Wolfgang

Bertrand Island Press/Top Shelf

A few months old in its self-published form, this is being made more widely available through Top Shelf and is well worth seeking out. At 160 pages in a 6" by 9" format, and with a succession of cubes in cream, beige and brown as a cover design, the book is an example of idiosyncratic design at its best; the sort of little book that forces you to look inside it, and then to huddle into it in order to read it.

Where Hats Go presents an entirely wordless tale, told in a loose Crumb/Bagge style, brown-inked onto cream pages and utilising some very clear storytelling and thoughtful use of ideograms. To say that it is romantic and sentimental would be to convey the best meaning of the words, rather than the soulless modern equivalents that we are so used to. To describe the story as being about a young boy searching for the hat blown from his head one morning would be a disservice to the wealth of emotion and honest substance to be found in these pages.

Where Hats Go is exactly the sort of comic we need to showcase the worth of comics as a narrative; being without genre and, consequently, without suffering prejudice, it's a story literally anyone could read, and – ironically, being a story children could read – it makes me a little embarrassed to still be reading Spider-Man.

The Verdict: A beautifully designed and presented little masterpiece of storytelling for young and old alike. (AC)



BEAUTIFUL LOSERS CLASSIC FAILED COMICBOOKS

Lionised by the critics, loved by a small hardcore of fans, completely ignored by everybody else – we look at the comics series which vanished far too quickly. This month: Phil Hall explains why you should all have been reading...

coventry

created by Bill Willingham; published by Fantagraphics Books
3 issues - October 1996 - July 1997



Next: Beezil and Stephanie go on a road trip to dig up something real bad. Claudia talks with frogs and Max lands himself in a bureaucratic quagmire of rules and regulations from that nice place upstairs. Plus, a bold new addition to our cast – former president Richard Milhous Nixon. Honest.

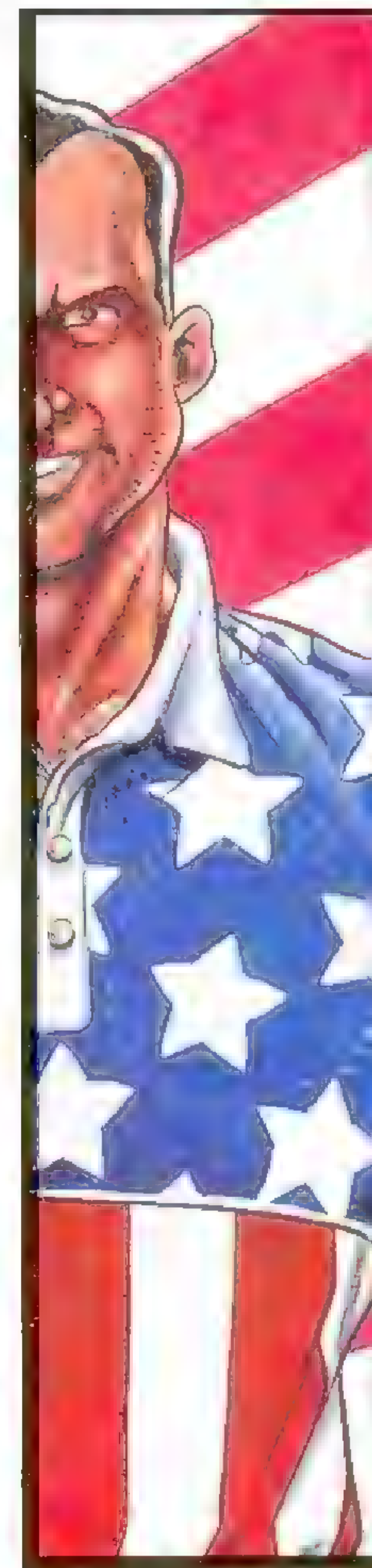
But of course, this never happened. The above “next issue” blurb and the picture (of an athletic Prez Richard Nixon) to the right were the last we ever saw of Coventry (apart from the words below from creator Bill Willingham). This comic looks not so much a Beautiful Loser, but more like a Beautiful Victim. This is a comic some believe is possibly one of the greatest ever created, yet it last only three issues, resolved nothing and is unlikely to ever appear again while the current comics market is as it is. Willingham, at his www.comicon.com booth, has this statement about Coventry, “Unfortunately it barely sold enough for me to make a reasonable living. That might have been okay, but month-by-month Fantagraphics (undergoing hard times in this shaky market) was becoming increasingly less able to pay me the small amounts of money the series actually earned (as of this writing they are still more than half a year late on payments to me). Finally it got to the point where I

was going to have to get a day job in order to survive. Well, I haven’t had to have a day job in seventeen years. I’ve forgotten what it’s like to make an honest living, and I’m not fit for anything but cartooning. Therefore I had to put Coventry on the shelf for a while and go on to other, better paying, projects.”

Three things conspired to prevent Coventry from becoming the huge hit it should have been: 1) Fantagraphics Books is hardly known for massively supporting its hit creators, so the chances of it throwing a lot of money into promoting an unknown series by a guy best known for a superhero comic and some porn fantasy was always going to be pretty slim; 2) the extortionate, even for 1996, \$3.95 cover price – people only expect to pay that much for porn; and 3) Bill Willingham himself – hardly the best selling comics creator, known to be pretty single-minded with his ideas and, well, he did a porn comic...

In fact, there is a nasty number of cloak and dagger rumours circulating about this comic, enough to suggest that its failure was not due to a lack of popularity. Despite Fantagraphics’ insistence that the series was something of a flop, it didn’t appear that way, especially in the United Kingdom. Copies of #1 were exchanging hands

for as high as £10.00, even while Fantagraphics



continually advertised the series in Diamond's *Previews* for re-orders - however, no one in the UK received copies of *Coventry* and the back issue price continued to rise. At the time, a UK comics' magazine reported that Fantagraphics were supplying some UK

dealers with copies at a premium price - far more than the publisher would have received from Diamond Distributors. However, these allegations were never proved and they didn't really matter, as *Coventry* had been shelved long before this rumour gained any momentum.

Whether or not *Coventry* was a success or not doesn't change the fact that it was ahead of its time; it was beautifully crafted and intelligently plotted. In fact, one can see why those hooked by it are desperate for it to continue. Willingham proved that not only could he write complex ideas, but he could also really tell a story with his pictures. He needed to be able to, because *Coventry* appeared to have about fifty, interesting, subplots running by the end of the third issue.

Coventry is the 51st State of the Union - a small State, situated south of Oregon and north of California. It is split into five regions: Coast, Pandora (where the commercial and economic capital is), Mount Herod, Eastern and The Mephisto Valley (where the state capital, Salem, is). *Coventry* is also the place where all the mythological creatures of the world live. The trolls, the werewolves, the demons, the things that live under your bed or in your closet - expect the unexpected in *Coventry*, and don't be surprised if you have a conversation with a skeleton or an administrative assistant from the office that supplies Angels of Death.

The thing that impresses about *Coventry* from the very beginning is that Willingham is treating his subject matter seriously and therefore, however



'silly' it seems in concept, it never descends to the depths you expect. It isn't a comedy, but it is funny.

As you've probably guessed by now, Bill Willingham is best known for his hardcore porn fantasy *Ironwood* - an essentially unfinished tale that was both imaginative and sexually explicit in equal amounts. His other work has included creating *The Elementals*, a critically acclaimed success for long-dead publisher Comico, and pencils on *Justice League International* and *Green Lantern*. *Ironwood* was known for its amusing,

post-modern take on the fairy tale mythology. It was a different fantasy world from *Coventry*, set a long ago time, and had lots of fucking in it. Strip away the sex and it reads like a contemporary fantasy story, not dissimilar to Todd DeZago and Mike Wieringo's *Tellos* or Trent Kanuiga's *Creed*. However, there hadn't really been anything like *Coventry* before and until Vertigo's series *Fables*, incidentally written and created by Bill Willingham, nothing since. The moment you finished reading the first issue you knew that you'd wandered

into something a little bit different. The idea could quite easily work as a TV series, and, perhaps because it is created by a writer/artist, it paced out like a TV show. In the tradition of really good drama, by the time you got to the end of #2 you were hopelessly lost in a dozen subplots and Willingham was cleverly reversing our usual conception of this kind of idea. Cute wasn't necessarily good, while big and ugly were not necessarily evil.

The story begins with a plague of frogs in the village of Hunley

(Coventry is a very English place, with inns and architecture befitting Oxbridge rather than San Francisco) and we are introduced to one of Coventry's heroes - Claudia Nevermore. Gradually as the issue goes on we meet William Weck, Claudia's assistant, Ricky Cortez - a lieutenant in a special section of the Pandora City PD, John Golen - a special agent for the Department of Lycanthropy and eventually Beezil - an imp from Hell. It leaves far more questions than answers and by the time the third issue closes

Claudia is on the trail of a long missing God, Beezil is ruining a poor lawyer's life, Leslie Maxwell, a small-time private investigator has been recruited to find a missing Angel of Death and there's a werewolf on the loose around Pandora City. There are more subtler plots as well: what are the collection of "things" that Claudia has a differing amount of respect for; why is Beowulf so down on his luck; why has the Old Lady's shoe taken up residence in Main Street; and why the frogs, especially on Hunley? And that's it. Lots of

unanswered questions, dangling subplots, interesting character introductions and then, after July 1997... zip.

When asked if Coventry will ever reappear Willingham says, "The answer is yes and no. Coventry's not entirely dead. In some form or another it will appear again, probably self-published. Hang on if you can. It's not coming soon, but, barring unforeseen calamities, it is coming... someday. For those of you who bought the first three issues, thank you dearly."

One thing that is clear to anyone reading Coventry

is that it has the kind of feel about it that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* sort of captured in its early days, although it appeared a couple of years before the *Buffy* TV series (which bore no real resemblance to the *Buffy* movie).

It was post-modern horror and fantasy mixed, a story that appeared to have been written for either comicbook or the screen. You can imagine all of the characters interacting and this was before Joss Whedon, or Harry Potter, or any of the revamping of myths and legends that has been rife, and successful, during the last five or six years.

Willingham admits that Coventry isn't dead and is also quite adamant that *Fables*, his Vertigo series with a similar concept, is most definitely not his "dead smart" book - the one that he would make his money on and spend the rest of his life doing. That's because Coventry is.

And what you need to do is firstly find these three issues and marvel at them, and secondly write to Willingham, Fantagraphics, your local priest, whoever you think it might work with and try and get this returned to where it belongs - on the shelves. I believe that if it really was a sales disaster that was down to the fact that no one knew about it and by the time they did it was too late. You don't need to see the potential in this story; it positively bristles with it from the cover of #1 to the picture of a youthful Richard Nixon on the back cover of #3. If being enigmatic is enough to make something a masterpiece, then that is

only part of the reason why Coventry is a work of art.

For additional information about Coventry and Bill Willingham go to: <http://www.comicon.com/willingham/faq.htm>



EASTERN PROMISE

We begged, we pleaded, and Kevin Hill came up with the goods...

SEX-YOU-AL-IT-EE

AH, the words of Billy Bragg. The perfect words to introduce this month's topic. That's right, this month is all about sexuality. Not sex, or any of that rubbish. Sexuality. Hetero, homo, bi – the lot.

There should probably be a reason for looking at a topic like this, but there isn't. No, that's a lie. Something did trigger it: a call to the troops from my illustrious leader Mr. Shipp. It's not bad really, that I can get an article out

of my editor [*make the most of it – MS*].

Sexuality it is then. Now, I'm not about to tell you that every comic in Japan has gay characters – heterosexuality is just as rife in Japan as it is in the West. The fact is that gay characters in comics for boys are relatively rare. While that is not how the world should be, it is nevertheless unsurprising. Where things differ is that the Japanese market comics specifically for women and girls – pretty much a foreign concept

(literally in this case) to the American market. Inside these comics there is a higher tendency to include non-heterosexual characters, particularly in the comics for teens.

A quick glance over the releases from Tokyopop will reveal a number of examples. Tokyopop publishes a number of girls', or *sojoh*, comics. These titles, ranging from children's works

like **Cardcaptor Sakura** to more adult material such as **Paradise Kiss**, contain a number of gay or bisexual characters. No big deal is made of their sexuality, they just happen to be another kind of character type the writer uses.

Any parents out there, or fans of the *Cardcaptors* cartoon, may be surprised to learn that it rewrites the original characters to suit an American audience. In the comics' version, Sakura's best friend Tomoyo (Madison in the cartoon) makes at least one reference to the fact that she is in love with Sakura. Yuki (Julian) implies that he is in love with Sakura's brother. It is understandable that, with the underlying social structure of America, these characteristics were written out, but it is still surprising, to us, that a comic deals with children's sexuality. This isn't the only example of Studio Clamp, **Cardcaptor Sakura**'s creators, utilising gay or bisexual characters. Two other Tokyopop-published titles feature such characters. **Clover** includes a couple comprised of a young boy and an older soldier. No real reference is made to their relationship, which is treated as any other would be. In **Wish**, a recent addition to the 100% Authentic line, there is at least one bisexual character, maybe even two. Again, little is made of their sexuality. It isn't



seen as a big deal.

In **Paradise Kiss**, a story based around the world of fashion, the lead male is bisexual.

This time a big deal *is* made of that fact, but only because the lead female character begins a relationship with him. She is

young and inexperienced in life, and so it comes as something of a shock to her that the man she has fallen for is bisexual, something that would probably surprise most girls like her. Of course, little is made of **Paradise Kiss**' main gay character, who mostly stands



MAN ON A MISSION

Martin Shipp with a pair of leather chaps around his legs...

YOU may be able to hear the long sigh of exasperation no matter where you are. Y'see, it's like this...

You may well know that Marvel Comics is publishing a new series featuring their old Western character The Rawhide Kid. You may know this from Marvel's own publicity releases, but you're more likely to have seen one of the news reports on the matter. Because this series has gotten some serious publicity, not seen since, ooh, *The Very Long Sleep Of Superman*. The *New York Times* reported on it, as did the London broadsheet *The Independent On Sunday*, neither

of them being exactly purveyors of trivia. I mean, they're not going to devote a full page of their main news section to the new Avengers line-up.

In case you've been living in Camp X-Ray for the last few weeks, you'll know that the Unique Selling Point of this Rawhide Kid series is that the character is to be written as gay. Or if not actually as homosexual, at least as a bit camp. From what I gather, this will be the Rawhide Kid as played by John Inman or Harvey Fierstein. There's nothing wrong with this, as my colleague Mr. Hill points out in this issue's *Eastern Promise*. A character's sexuality is entirely their own affair. I doubt seriously that Marvel will go the whole hog and make the Kid a leather queen, and I believe the references to Fiestaware and fisting will be minimal at best, but the re-interpretation may add a certain new dimension to the Old West. If advance reports are anything to go by, we may be looking at mainstream comics' own *La Cage Au Folles*.

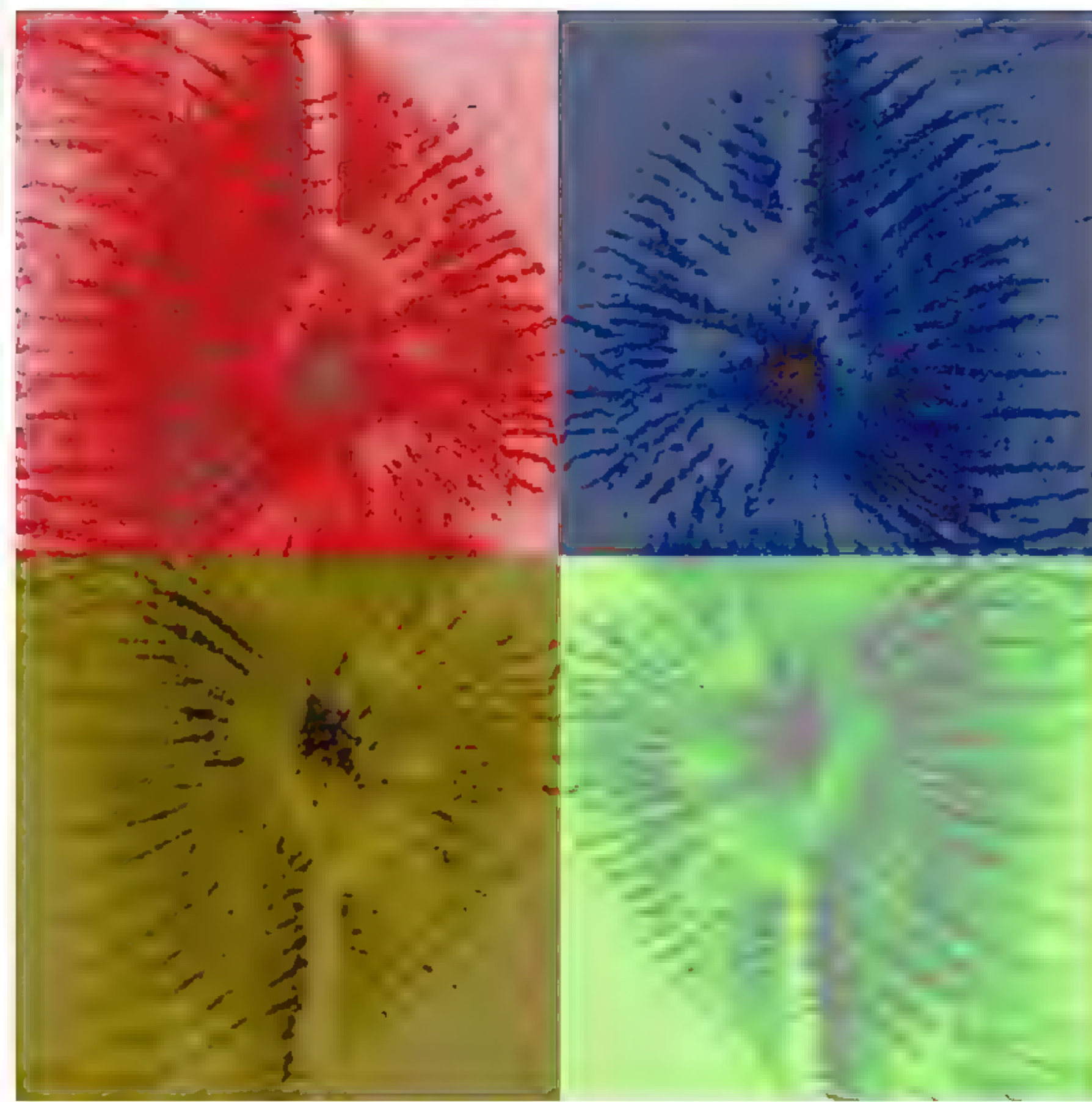
Whatever: the papers picked the story up and gave it big space. If this gets people to read a comic, that's a good thing. However, the story was also picked up by the British free morning tabloid newspaper *Metro*, a thing which is given away at London tube stations to

harassed commuters. And wouldn't you believe it, two days after the story appeared a letter was published in *Metro*. It said essentially this (and I must paraphrase, for I do not have the paper to hand, being the type who either reads the cast-off issue left by another wage slave or who tosses the copy onto the floor at the first sight of yet another Cherie Blair story): "why can't you newspaper types get your facts right? Everybody knows the first gay superhero appeared in Alpha Flight #106, etc, etc."

And this is what I have a problem with.

However the newspapers may have reported the story, regardless of any behind-the-hand sniggering or ooh-get-her snidiness, at least there was coverage and at least that coverage did not, for once, resort to biff-bang-pow comics-reporting cliché. The story was treated, at least in that coverage which I saw, in a fair and unsensational manner. It was, if you'll excuse the inapposite phrasing, straight reportage. And as such, the readership seem to have accepted the news as just another arts story.

But with one simple letter, somebody whose name I don't recall has reinforced the old "comics readers as anal retentives" prejudice, giving the readership of at least one



It's the multi-coloured arsehole show! Yes this is exactly what it looks like...

newspaper the opportunity to breathe easily in the knowledge that hey, comics *are* just for arseholes after all!

Look: be proud of this medium. For all its faults, it's a fine and wonderful thing. None of us would be here if it wasn't. But please, also learn that certain prejudices are very easily reinforced. To a lot of people, the reader of comics is of similar status to the model train collector or the birdwatcher who spends wet lonely hours in a hide. As far as they're concerned they're doing something perfectly normal; in their opinion they're doing something which verges on

noble (and as somebody with the two strikes against him of being both a reader of comics and something of a twitcher, I can verify the quite ineffable feeling of pride and benevolence that follows the simple act of putting up a suet ball for the finches in the back garden). But to the man on the street, the joys of OO gauge or of seeing a pair of Pied Wagtails foraging in a built-up area are nebulous at best and suspicious at worst.

So be careful about how you evangelise, would you? For me? Thanks.

Oh, and have a happy new year.





Todd
McCarty

THE BACK ENTRANCE

With Todd McCarty

HEY there everybody! The comics industry is full of gossip, news and rumour, and since it's Christmas, the lovely folks at *World Of Heros* have asked me to write a special issue of my gossip column, *The Back Entrance*, just for you! So, sit back and enjoy as I root through the guts of the comics industry and pull out glistening gobbets of gossip for your delectation!

Devin In DC Heavin!

I HEAR that Mark Waid's sister **Devin Grayson** has signed exclusively for DC Comics - and the poor folks at Marvel are just broken up about it! Marvel have been hoping to get Devin all to themselves ever since **Ghost Rider: The Hammer Lane** went down so well with both critics and fans! There there, Marvel, cheer up - remember, every silver lining has a cloud!

WORLD OF HEROS

Sean was obsessed with the very fat lady with the flaps... Chris "SC" Spicer.

Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu!
SPOTTED: Ex-2000 AD editor **David Bishop**, seen talking on the phone to *Comics International* editor **Desmond Skinn** about the *arch* wit he'd be using in his latest column - which may or may not be about *tutus*!

Lord Of The Rungs!

WHEN a dirty window threatened the view from his house, popular creator **Geoff Johns** leapt into action like Superman responding to the timid cry of a stricken schoolmistress! He whipped out a ladder, zipped up it like the Flash and had that window beaten into submission faster than you can say "By the Hoary Hosts of Nob-Suckoff!"

Respect My Authority!

A REAL exclusive, this! Keep it to yourself, but it looks like everyone's favourite superhero family **The Authority** could be returning to our shelves soon! The new series, called **The Authority: Sometimes They Come Back**, is to be written by newcomer **Robin Williams**, with art by **Dwayne Liefield**! Wildstorm are trying to keep the lid on this one, so remember - you heard it here first!

Mad-Fat Friday!

CAPTAIN MERVILLE writer **David Peters** is an angry boy!

Apparently, he woke up one Friday and just blew his top, and hasn't calmed down since! Asked what he was angry about, the normally perfectly reasonable Peters said, "I'm just pissed off, okay?" Whew! Sounds like he's got an axe to grind with pretty much everyone! Expect a strongly worded Open Letter any day now, people!

Ultimate Marvel Team Up!

FINALLY, **Brian Michael Bendis** will be celebrating after his favourite soccer team, Upper-Dunny United, won promotion! The team, who play a little-known sport from the UK, were recently promoted to the next league in the tournament, which will no doubt delight Bendis - he once signed a comic for a Dunsters fan! A spokesperson for Bendis said, "Brian has no comment - he's never even heard of them." Now now, Brian, there's no need to be coy with us!

That's all for this issue, folks! Hope you've enjoyed this glimpse into the *real* depths of the comics industry! See you soon, and remember - if it happens in the comics industry, you'll find it in *The Back Entrance*!

Todd McCarty's gossip column, *The Back Entrance*, is syndicated in over three hundred US newspapers.

COMIC FAN QUOTES STAR WARS, FEELS SUPERIOR

IN a victory for comics fans everywhere, chatroom user Robert Dalzell, better known by his online nom de plume *Sh@d0wh@wk*, saw off an intrusion into the comicsfan.micrx.net chatroom using nothing more than his wit, the support of other similarly bookish, insular nerds... and an old Jedi mind trick!

The incident occurred last Saturday, when a mysterious stranger invaded the normally peaceful chatroom. Dalzell told us: "We were there, chatting about really important issues like Wonder Woman's cup size, when this dude just appeared! Thankfully, with the help of my super-buddies, we were able to get rid of him quicker than Joe Quesada on a bottle of Budweiser!"

Other chatroom user L33tb0y told us "It was great! This guy was like 'What do you think of the latest Spider-Man?' and we were all like, 'N00b! N00b!' And he was like, 'But I only wanted to chat about comics,' and I was like 'L@m3r foo!! This chatroom is for l33t h@x0rs only!1!!' Then *Sh@d0wh@wk* said, 'This isn't the chatroom you're looking for!' And we were all like 'LOL! That rocks!' And that guy just said 'Oh, for goodness sake' and disappears! Only *Sh@d0wh@wk* could come up with a quote like that, and the way he changed the word 'droids' to the word 'chatroom' - excellent! It was the way he just came out with it, off the cuff! Dude's a genius!"

Sh@d0wh@wk is being modest about his brilliant putdown. "It was nothing. I just thought 'What would Obi-Wan say in a situation like this?' What can I say - my strength flows from the Force."

A final word from *Sh@d0wh@wk*? "1 @m l33t h@x0r! LOL! ROFLMAO!!!1!"



That Was The Year That Was

As Christmas 2002 lurched through its natural course of desperate last minute shopping and frantic food stuffing, someone thought it might be a nice idea if the various members of the *Borderline* editorial staff each jotted down a couple of hundred words about how the year in comics had looked to them. Amazingly, they all obliged! So here, despite many a hangover and virus, is the *Borderline* Round-Up of 2002...

PETE ASHTON

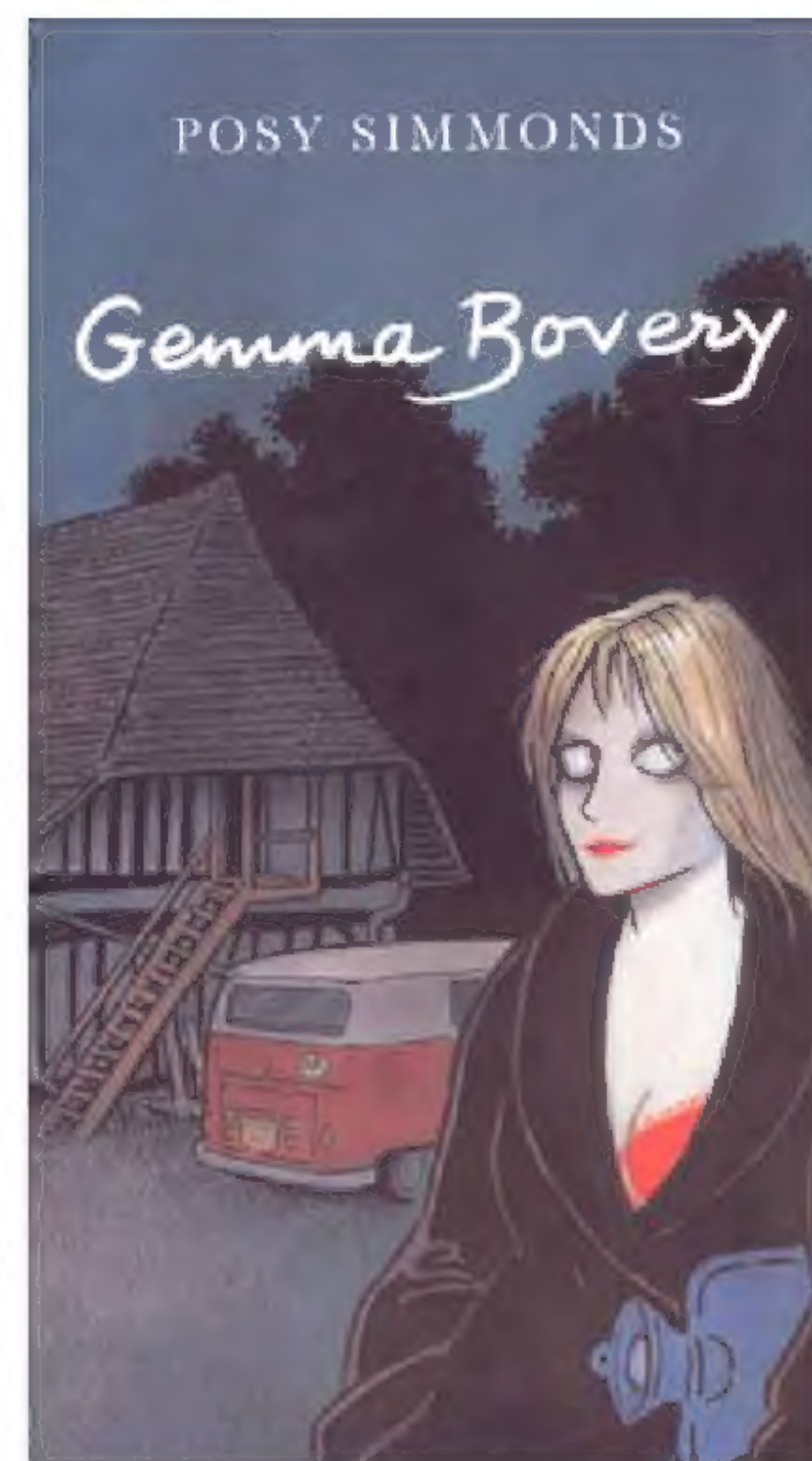
MY comics year was a mixture of the old and the new. EBay proved itself again and again to be the most invaluable dot.com business to date as I picked up all of the **Posy Simmonds** newspaper strip collections from the 1980s, along with other gems that should never have gone out of print.

On the new front my most significant discovery was the **USS Catastrophe shop** [www.usscatastrophe.com/store/] run by Kevin Huizenga and friends. For a mini-comics fan in the UK this is a perfect one-stop service for the kinds of comics that are feeding the next wave. So far I've bought everything on their list and 90% of it has been excellent.

Kevin Huizenga

[www.usscatastrophe.com/kh/] himself impressed mightily with his **Supermonster: Gloriana Comics**, which is now sadly out of print. He's a name to watch and no mistake.

On the comics theory front **Dylan Horrocks** [www.hicksville.co.nz/] continued to make his mark as the most forward thinking pundit in the field. His interview in *The Comics Journal* was a blast and he managed to pull together why the current crop of "boring" comics are important, citing their attempts to convey stillness on the comics page. While this may seem stupid to some, being able to communicate nothing going on and make it gripping is surely the



biggest challenge to a cartoonist, and to see that articulated was a major breakthrough.

As for next year, I've been

enjoying watching at first hand the UK underground comics scene start to coalesce into something exciting. Amongst other things, watch for a new anthology titled **Sentence** coming your way in January, and yes, I have a vested interest in it!

*Pete Ashton was a founding editor of **Borderline** and runs **BugPowder.com**, a forum and portal for the UK small press scene, alongside his own weblog, peteashton.com.*

DANNY BLACK

2002. It was all about **The Incredible Hulk**, **The New X-Men**, **X-Statix**, **The Ultimates**, **Humanoids Publishing** and **Batman** for me.

On a personal level, it was the year that I waved goodbye to 75% of the monthly titles I was collecting and decided to switch to TPBs.

Sure, it wasn't all good in 2002. There was the limp return of **Rogue Trooper** to **2000AD**, the





rise and fall of the promising **Cla\$\$War**, the merry-go-round of artists on **The New X-Men** and the lack of promotion of actual comics during Spider-Man film fever. And let's not forget the death of John Buscema early in 2002.

What do I want for 2003? Bendis on a **Moon Knight** mini series would be nice, a resurgence in the **JLA** title, Morrison slapping **The Authority** into shape, a fixed creative team on **Vampirella** and more work from Adam Hughes and Stuart Immonen.

Finally I'd like to see more recognition for the wider world of comics. I'm the first to admit to being superhero fixated - but there is a whole world of topics, art styles and talent out there, a never-ending supply of comics entertainment, and it's time we started exploring it and learning from it. And if I didn't remind you that it's all covered in **Borderline**,

I wouldn't be doing my job ☺

*Danny Black, debonair man about Sarf Lundun, is **Borderline's** Mr. Publicity. If pushed, he'll admit to enjoying Radiohead occasionally.*

JAY EALES

WHAT were my comics high and low points of 2002? The absolute peaks and troughs would have to be the ones relating to this very magazine: it's been very much a Good News, Bad News year. Good News: Cool Beans gave us legitimacy in the eyes of some Doubting Thomases by making us part of their site; Bad News: they neglected to pay us, and filed for bankruptcy after passing a bad cheque. Good News: Rebellion courted us to be their third print magazine, alongside **2000AD** and the **Judge Dredd Magazine**; Better News: While negotiations were going well, **Borderline** won the National Comics Award for Best Comics Magazine or

Website; Bad News: the distributor didn't feel that the newsstand market would support a comics magazine, possibly recalling **Comics World**, which only lasted a paltry 60-plus monthly issues. Sigh...

On the comics front, I've found a lot of titles to engage my interest this year, from the continuations of Jim Krueger's **The Footsolders** and Guy Davis' **The Marquis**, to the not-as-good-as-Coventry-but-still-a-thoroughly-good-read **Fables**, by Bill Willingham, follow-ups to last year's hit **Zero Girl** and **Noble Causes**, and the debut of **Rex Mundi**. Mike Carey brings **Hellblazer** safely home after Brian Azzarello's Americanised take on the title, leading, I suspect to the same number of readers, but with a higher Brit to Yank ratio once again.

Other recommendations: Dark Horse: **Amazing Screw-On Head**, **Hellboy**; Marvel: **Deadline**, **New**

X-Men; Hotel Fred Press: **Fred The Clown**; Dancing Elephant Press: **Jack Staff**; DC/Vertigo/ABC: **Gotham Central**, **League of Extraordinary Gentlemen II**, **Midnight, Mass**; Oni Press: **Hopeless Savages**, **One Plus One**, **Queen & Country**, **Skinwalker**; Image/Top Cow: **Rising Stars**; Viz: **Uzumaki**.

*Jay Eales, one of **Borderline's** two news and features specialists, moved house in the autumn of the year. He's a self-confessed fan... of just about everything!*

MIKE KIDSON

THE fan market for American superhero comics has seemingly become yet more closed off and defensive in the last year. Icon of the Year from that point of view has to be Frank Miller's universally reviled **DK2**: personally, I'm intrigued by how it seems to be playing with form and design. But in the small marketplace it caters to, apparently the fact that it isn't drawn the way Miller used to draw twenty years ago makes it pernicious.

Along more positive lines I've greatly enjoyed catching up on the revival of Martin Lodewijk's **Agent 327** series, a classic Dutch series which has unexpectedly made a major comeback and is as lively, smart and funny as it ever was. Comic of the Year, though,

has to be Eddie Campbell's trade collection **After the Snooter**, an astonishingly rich and lively workout on the theme of aging that demonstrates just how flexible and expressive the comics medium can be.

As I write this, I've just read and reviewed three very enjoyable small press comics. Just what I needed to remind me that there's plenty of good out there in the medium's future.

*Mike Kidson, **Borderline's** production editor, is currently enjoying reading anything other than sex comics.*

TOM LENNON

2002: there hasn't been a year quite as palindromic as this since 1991. Looking back, I could list





MIKE SIVIER

AS far as I can see, it's been a very conservative year for comics - certainly in the western world. **The Dark Knight** struck back in the early part of the year, only to discover he'd finally lost his strength, leaving the way open for Marvel to dominate the American market unopposed.

Marvel was supported by two blockbuster movies - one of which was almost certainly the film of

the year for many viewers. But despite the success of *Blade II* and *Spider-Man*, the company was unable to capture a share of cinema audiences and its flagship titles only managed to sell around 100,000 issues per month.

Storywise, the company was at its strongest for years, with J Michael Straczynski on **Amazing Spider-Man**, Bruce Jones on **Incredible Hulk**, and John Ney Rieber on Marvel Knights'

Captain America producing fine work.

But behind the scenes Marvel was the same corporate monster, with its eye always on short-term gains and free publicity. That's not the way forward.

In Britain, the resurgence of **2000AD** under new owners Rebellion was muted by a controversy over new contracts which allegedly demand that creators hand over all rights to their characters and stories, including past stories.

On the independent side, Com.X lost ground with an erratic schedule and an illiterate website, leaving the way open for new pretenders like APComics to seek an audience.

As ever, the most interesting part of the comics scene in this country remains that occupied by the small press titles - but who bothers to read those?

For 2003, I predict more consolidation from the major publishers, coupled with even less experimentation. Someone needs to find a solid, appealing, and above all *cheap* format in which to produce good comics - and an effective way of promoting those comics to the current mass market.

We're all - still - a long way from that.

*Mike Sivier, also one of **Borderline's** two news and features specialists, was also one of two members of our editorial staff who had an article in Bryan Talbot's **Arkeology** way back when. Not a lot of people know that.*

MARTIN SHIPP

2002: **X-Force/X-Statix, Cerebus, Catwoman, Incredible**



Hulk, Joe Kelly, that really weirdly drawn Superman story about the baby [by Carlos Meglia - *Production Ed.*], **Flaming Carrot/Reid Fleming**, er... er... If anything, 2002 was the year when the majority of mainstream comics kind of gave up the ghost and the majority of non-mainstream comics lost the fight to get in front of the public, as more and more retailers concentrated on guaranteed sellers from the majors. It's nice to see the majors' flagship characters getting the star creative personnel they deserve, but if the cost of that is the loss of a diverse and exciting smaller press and creative under-investment in the second/third-tier books from the majors it can only end in tears.

Nice to see also the growing popularity of a simpler art style in mainstream books, following the

the comics that I enjoyed, the comics that annoyed and even the comic I destroyed (**DK2** #2, in a bizarre yet righteous gardening accident). I could say a few words about how my continued joy at the marriage of top creators with their greatest icons is offset by the disturbing amount of unabashed jingoism that seems to be creeping into Marvel titles (**Daredevil vs Bullseye**, anyone? And is it just me, or has anyone else noticed how all this has coincided with those army recruitment ads they've been running on the back covers?). Instead of this, however, I find myself thinking about the most tragic event of the comics year. While 2002 witnessed the passing of a significant number of talented, inspirational people - from Joe Strummer to James Coburn, from Richard Harris to Chuck Jones - the death of John Buscema was the one that hit me the hardest. The comics industry lost one of its finest craftsmen, while the rest of us said goodbye to someone who etched countless heroic icons onto our childhood imaginations.

Tom Lennon is one of our recent additions to the editorial team. One day we'll find something for him to do...



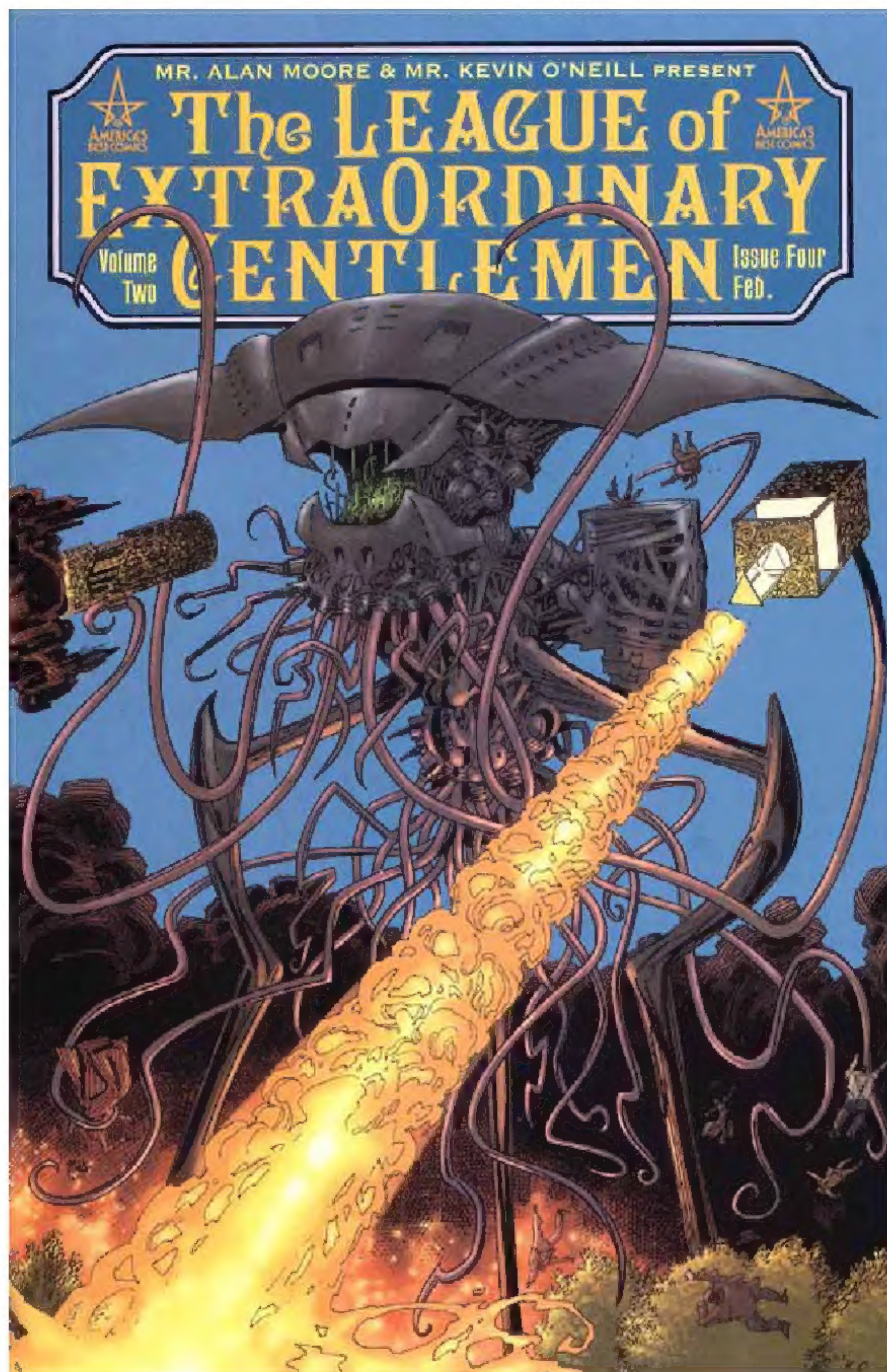
lead set by Bruce Timm and continued by Darwyn Cooke, Cameron Stewart, etc. After twenty years of comics artists drawing every... <skritch> little... <skritch> line, it's been lovely seeing a new wave coming through who realise the Liefeldisms are redundant beside the beauty of a well-placed thick black line.

Oh, and could we have a decent **Dr. Strange** series, please?

Martin Shipp, our intrepid publisher, would like to teach the world to wear mullets again in 2003. Consider yourselves warned.

ANDY WINTER

COMICS 2002, the UK comic convention in Bristol, was the main highlight for me this year, and not only because I launched my first graphic novel – **Devilchild** – there. The UK indie publishing scene seems to be going through a purple patch right now and that was certainly reflected in the number of young, enthusiastic creators in attendance at Bristol flogging their own comics – and damn good many of them were too. It was just a pity that the convention itself received such hostile criticism from some quarters. Okay, so the venue was far from perfect and the heat occasionally unbearable, but maybe some of the doom and gloom merchants could either get involved with organisers Kev F. Sutherland and Mike Allwood to help make it better or, seeing as how they're such authorities on the organisation of comic conventions, have a go at setting up their own. Whatever, such unpleasant, unconstructive sniping does no one any favours. Enjoyed a lot of comics in 2002, especially Mike Carey's **Hellblazer**, Moore and O'Neill's



League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen Vol. II, Ian Edginton and Disraeli's **Scarlet Traces** (in the **Judge Dredd Megazine**) and Pete Milligan and Mike Allred's **X-Statix**.

*Andy Winter has been **Borderline**'s reviews editor since the beginning, but is now departing to concentrate on his own writing and publishing. We wish him all the best!*

PHIL HALL

Hmm... 2002. Up and down really. Actually down then up, but who's counting? It started badly for me and my family, got worse when we got conned big time by Cool Beans World.

The world became a rosier place when we, justifiably, won the award for best magazine at this year's National Comics Awards. Frankly I don't think there's anything out there that is as comprehensive or as international.

Successive attempts to gain finance or take us to print failed and yet we still carry on producing the best damned thing about comics going.

My awards for 2002 go to my team of editorial staff and all the people over the last 12 months who have selflessly given their time, energy and in many cases money to make sure we remain at the pinnacle of comics magazines. The real heroes of this year have been the people who make sure that *you* know what *should* be read and the stories that *you have* to know.

I think John Parkinson, Danny Black, Andy Winter, Jay Eales, Mike Sivier, Mike Kidson and for his investment and effort Martin Shipp are my stars for 2002. These are closely followed by all our columnists and contributors who really are too many to include, but you all know who you are and you all know what a fabulous job all of you do or did. I cannot thank you all enough. You all deserve something!

*Phil Hall is now ex-editor and he's going to sleep now... (but he's seriously thinking about pitching his sexy new idea for a **Doctor Strange** series to Joe Quesada...)*

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